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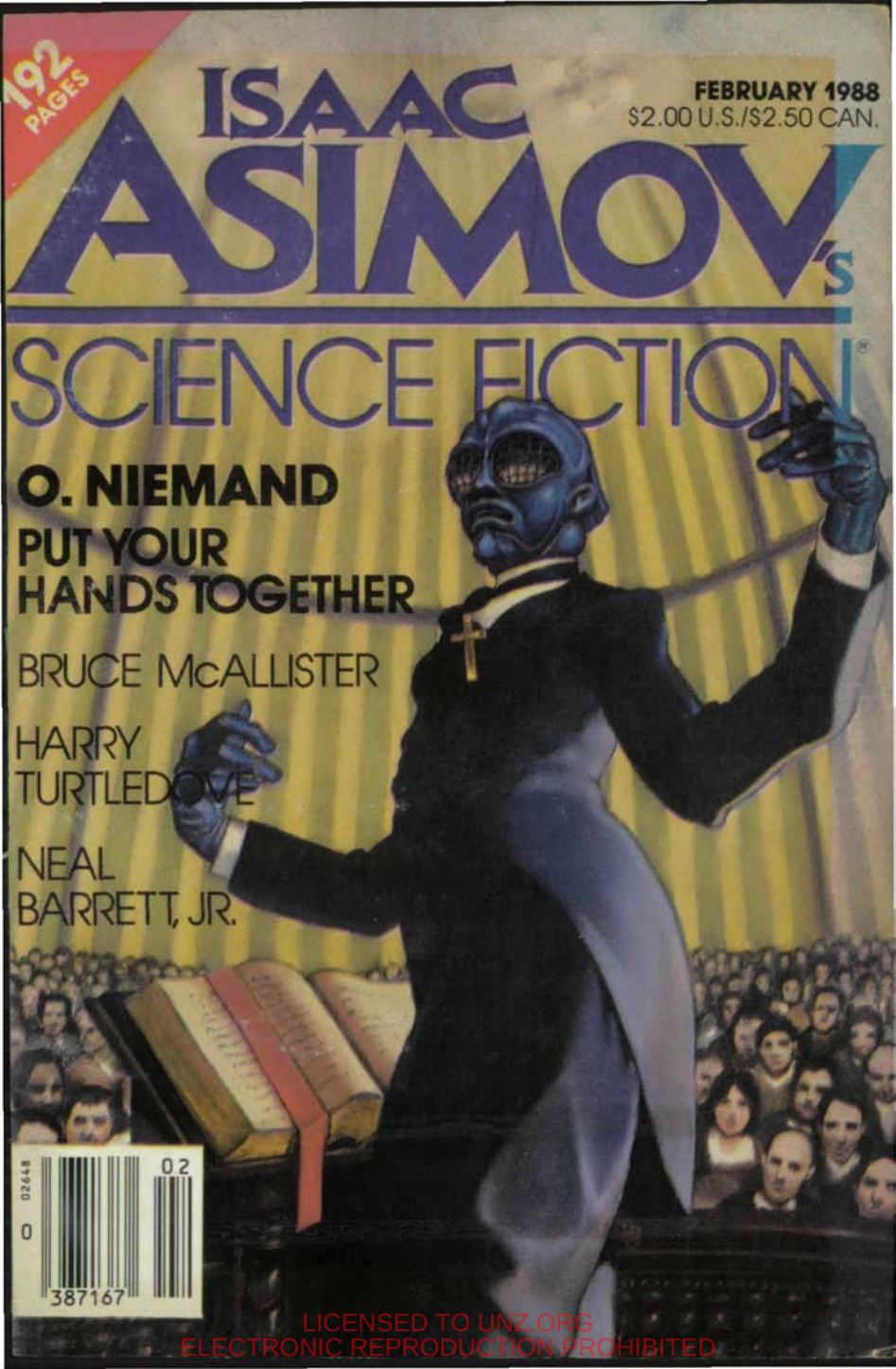

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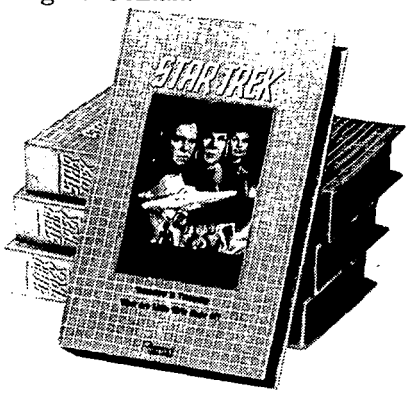

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

JUDGMENT

I got a letter some time ago from a man who apparently did not like my views on censorship. He didn't believe in freedom of speech and the press. He was under the impression, I think, that he knew exactly what people should say, read, and think, and he wanted to make his preferences, and *only* his preferences, available to people.

He wanted to prove that my broader views—my feeling that people should say, read, and think what they pleased—was phony, and he went about proving it by a heavy-handed irony.

He congratulated me first on being such a strong opponent of censorship. He then told me that he was sure that as an opponent of censorship, I published every story submitted to this magazine and every letter written for its Letter column.

He then feigned surprise. What! I did *not* print every story and letter? I picked and chose? I refused to print some of the stories and letters?

And then the full horror! Why, that's *censorship*.

How dare I in that case object to it?

Naturally, I laughed. My epistolary friend obviously thought he had an argument that would stop me cold. Little did he know that I had spent a quarter of a century arguing with the late, great John Campbell, and that John had used that same argument on me long ago. It didn't stop me then and it doesn't stop me now.

When the editor of this magazine, or any honest editor of any honest magazine or publishing house, reads through the material he receives, he tries to choose the best writing, the freshest idea, the most interesting style, and he publishes those and rejects the rest. This is not censorship; this is called *judgment*.

Why does he exert this judgment? Because it is physically impossible to print everything and so he wants to pick that which is best—for the reader's sake even more than for his own.

Naturally, editors are human. A given editor's judgment is not necessarily perfect. That's why there are many magazines, many publishing houses, and many editors. What one editor may judge to be unsatisfactory, another might judge

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to be satisfactory. For that matter, what a great many editors may agree is great, a great many readers may find terrible—and vice versa.

An imperfect judgment is not censorship; it is merely imperfect.

But then, what is censorship?

Censorship, where material submitted for publication is concerned, occurs when judgment is not based on the editor's opinion of the quality of the material. It occurs when an editor decides that a certain point of view, or a certain idea, or even certain words make an item unpublishable even though it is well-written, fresh, and interesting. Or he may not like the writer's skin color, religion, sex, accent, or table manners. The rejection does not depend upon a question of satisfactory or unsatisfactory, but on a taboo of some sort that exists in the editor's mind to begin with. The editor, in that case, doesn't even have to read the story.

"Here, sir, is a story that seems to advocate free love."

"Sinful, sinful, throw it away, I don't want to read it."

"How about this story by someone from Canada?"

"No, no. I hate Canadians."

"Well, then, here we have a story about flying saucers."

"No flying saucer stories in this magazine."

In censorship, in other words, you judge a story *before* you read it, and on grounds irrelevant to the story. In Latin, "to judge before" is "praejudicium." I wonder if you see

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the English word "prejudice" in that bit of Latin, because that's where the word comes from.

Please read a story first before you judge it, and judge it on grounds relevant to literature. You may not take long to judge it; the first page may convince you it is impossibly amateurish or dreadfully unreadable. That's all right; sometimes it just doesn't take long.

Or you may simply not be able to give a fair judgment; you may be so tired of stories that end with the two people, marooned on a virgin planet, just happening to be named Adam and Eve, that your gorge rises and you fail to recognize that you have a really good treatment there. You may be so turned off by an experimental style that you may fail to see what it manages to accomplish. But *try* at least. Do your best. —And Gardner does his best.

He judges. He doesn't censor. And if my foolish correspondent can't tell the difference, or pretends he can't, he merely demonstrates his own intellectual incapacity.

I have been judged in my time. Some good friends of mine—John Campbell, Horace Gold, Anthony Boucher, Ben Bova, George Scithers, Shawna McCarthy, Fred Pohl —have all rejected my writing at one time or another. It never bothered me (well, maybe a little bit) because judging is their job.

I have on rare occasions been censored. That *does* bother me.

I wrote a science essay on a new aspect of genetic counseling. As part of the essay, I wrote the following:

"In the summer of 1986, the location of the gene that can cause muscular dystrophy was pinpointed by cooperating researchers in the United States, Canada and Great Britain. What's more, they found out enough about the chemical nature of the defective gene to be able to test unborn children for its presence.

"It is now possible for parents who have already had dystrophic children, or who have had other relatives with the disease, to check a fetus during pregnancy to see if it shows the tell-tale chemical substance that indicates the presence of the abnormal gene.

"Indeed, since imperfect replication can happen at any time to anyone, it is possible for parents with no record of muscular dystrophy anywhere in either family to have a dystrophic child. Conceivably, then, every pregnant woman should be tested for this, and for a growing number of other serious diseases, as more and more is learned about genetic imperfections.

"Once the medical record is clear, the doctor and the parents, between them, can decide whether the unborn child should be allowed to come to term or to be aborted. The proper decision is important. It might easily be argued that seriously imperfect children will be a burden to themselves, to their families, and, indeed, to all of society.

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"There are difficulties involved, of course. These tests are expensive, and few parents can easily come up with the required cash. A case might well be made out, however, that the money spent by the government to detect serious imperfections in advance of birth will be less than the money spent in the necessary care of defective infants (let alone the incalculable cost of human misery) if births are allowed without previous testing.

"Another difficulty is ethical, for numerous people equate abortion, under any circumstances, with murder. However, as more and more prospective parents are forced to deal with the matter of a *known* defective fetus of some sort, it may be that the pressure of wanting a healthy baby will force a completely new look at the whole question."

Well, I'm sorry to say that this essay was turned back to me in two places. There was no question of its being poorly written, or uninteresting, or unimportant, or anything of the sort. In one case, in fact, it was edited and ready to be included when the feeling arose, "Well, better not."

I suppose you see why. In the essay, I indicate that this particular technological advance will raise the question of abortion, and I point out the case for such abortion for medical reasons. I do not do so polemically, or angrily, or emotionally. I make the point in so cold a manner that, frankly, I felt a little ashamed of myself when I wrote. I feel more strongly on the matter than I let myself show.

I also pointed out that when a number of parents are faced with having what they know will be a seriously imperfect child, the pro-choice cause will be greatly strengthened.

Well, the people who felt forced to return the piece knew that among the readers will be some who are anti-abortion beyond the reach of reason and who are so insecure about it that they are deathly afraid to read anything that might make a rational argument for pro-choice even under very special conditions. They don't want to be told that things might change and that their point of view might actually be weakened.

To me, this is not right. If you don't like a viewpoint or think it is fallacious, say so and give reasons, as I have done in opposing censorship and in pointing out a rationale for abortion. (I imagine I will get letters denouncing this editorial; I only hope that some of the denouncers will deign to present reasons in their turn.)

But to try to win an argument by preventing any presentation of an opposing view—to insist on winning by default—is not the act of a respectable intellect. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov and Mr. Dozois:

I finally got around to reading a few of my copies of *IAsfm* and I came across a short story in the February 1987 issue: "The Moment of the Rose" by Cherie Wilkerson. I feel that Ms. Wilkerson's contribution to your magazine was exceptional and noteworthy. Her story was well-structured and her characters skillfully drawn for such a short work. Her subtleties and tones in her short story leave a feeling of satisfaction in her readers. And, it was a good story.

I haven't read any other pieces by Ms. Wilkerson but it appears that she is a writer who bears watching. I hope that *IAsfm* will continue to publish her work (and, in fact, to encourage her to continue to submit her stories to *IAsfm*). I shall look forward to reading her again.

Sincerely,

R. Donald Allison, Ph.D.
University of Florida
JHMHC, Box J-245
Gainesville, Florida 32610

And the moral of the story is that if you don't put off reading your issues, you will come across more good stories more quickly. And you may be sure that the publication of your letter is the best encouragement Ms. Wilkerson can get.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I have followed with great interest the discussion in the letters column concerning whether a private individual may or may not devise a game based on a published story without the author's knowledge and consent.

I think that neither letter writer has addressed the central point of contention. That is, *how do we reconcile the author's intellectual property rights with the reader's right to privacy?* Does a game enthusiast have a moral right to use and even expand on an author's ideas, treating them as if they were his own? Does an author have a moral right to regulate, or even have knowledge of, a reader's social activities if he is not a member of that reader's social group?

These questions call for a value judgment. You have an opinion, and I have an opinion. Who is right? I dunno.

The statute affirms that copyright protection does not extend to ideas; it is given only to an author's expression of an idea. I have an impression that the Good Doctor is not altogether happy with this limitation.

Having gotten that off my chest, I would like to comment on the legality or illegality of such "adaptations" according to the copyright statute.

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Writer Thomasson defends the practice on the ground that it is too trivial to prosecute. I agree with you that this argument is unsatisfactory. It suggests a morality based on the premise that it is okay to do something if you can avoid punishment. But from a pragmatic point of view, he is probably correct. In deciding for or against fair use, the courts will take into account the extent of copying and whether there was financial gain. The statute instructs them to do so.

Writer Shurtleff points out that fair use does not apply to the creation of derivative works. Though technically true, his statement is misleading because the fair use defense may be used against an *allegation* of derivative work. Furthermore, the courts have ruled that a game, as such, is not copyrightable. If a thing is not copyrightable, it can hardly be held to be a derivative work.

I submit that merely playing such a game, no matter how grandly performed, is not against the statute because: (1) It is not copying onto a physical medium. (2) Playing with friends does not constitute public exhibition.

Therefore, if any infringement exists, it must be with the documentation and paraphernalia provided to support the game. A prudent gamer could avoid infringing by keeping his rules, records, and graphic materials sufficiently "pure" from such expressive material as may be found in the original work. Where required, a copy of the story itself could be used as a reference manual.

In short, a game player has several options for avoiding unlawful infringement. Getting the author's okay is just one of them.

Respectfully,

Ed Nichols
3401 Pleasant Plains Drive
Reisterstown, Md. 21136

It seems to me that people always attempt to gain as much as possible at the expense of others. If writers agreed to let the gamesters play privately among themselves, the gamesters would try to make a little (insignificant) profit. If writers agreed to that, gamesters would try to make a little more. My own feeling is that writers should be as strict as possible in the defense of their own property to keep the infringements of all these funny little people with no ideas of their own to a minimum. Naturally, I expect people with nothing at stake to be very judicious in this matter, but they probably keep a very close eye on their own wallets.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I wish to answer Ms. Pearse's letter regarding the temptation your magazine represents when one ought to be studying for finals. (Not, of course, that your own answer was not perfectly sufficient —but I have something to add.) I am also a college student, and every time my *IAsfm* arrives, I drop everything and read it all in one day. It does get in the way of studying—not only for finals, but also for midterms, quizzes, papers, and various and sundry other assignments. In December or in March (during which, by the way, many

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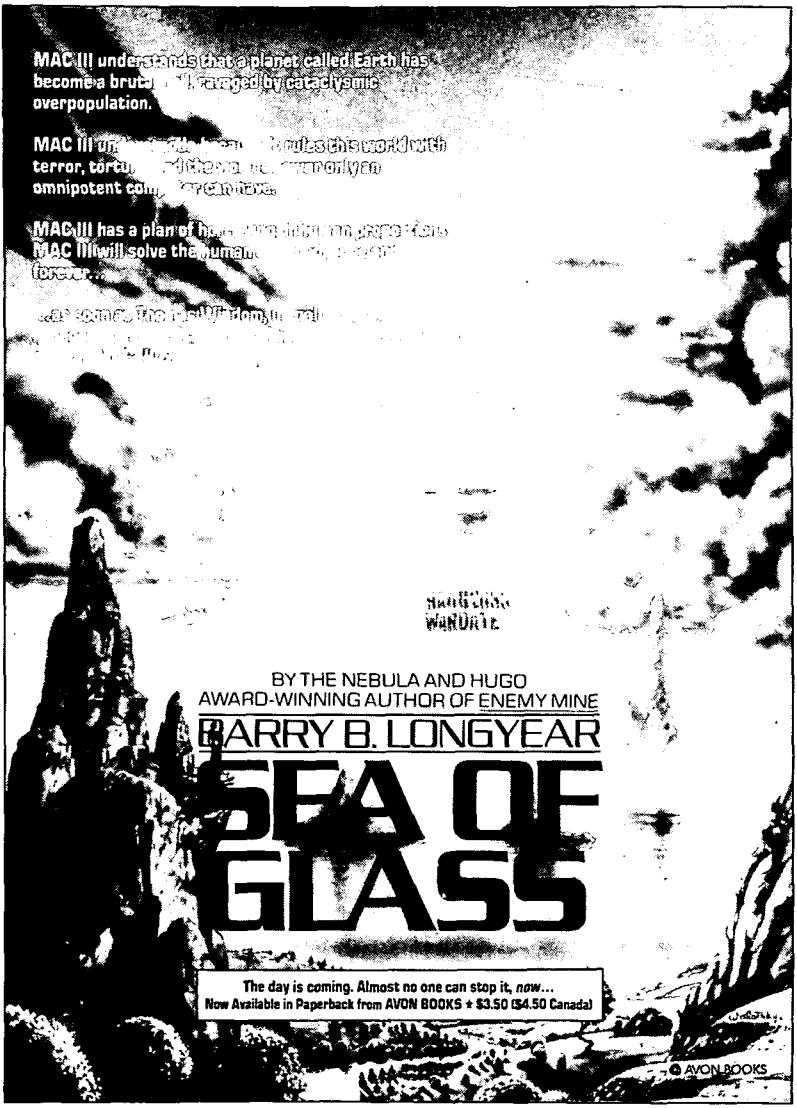
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universities on the quarter system have finals), the effect is the same.

In my case, *IAsfm* doesn't have to compete with Organic Chemistry (or actually Political Science —I'm not Pre-med), rather Organic Chemistry has to compete with *IAsfm*.

Sincerely,

Holly Lewis
University of California,
Berkeley, CA

Good! Look at it this way. A bowstring that is always kept taut eventually loses its spring. A little judicious relaxation will make it possible for you to tighten up when necessary with considerably greater facility. And there is no relaxation more pleasurable than losing yourself in the pages of IAsfm. *This probably accounts for the good work I'm sure you're doing.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

I enjoyed your editorial, "Intimations of Mortality," in the March 1987 issue of *IAsfm*. It raised some interesting points and it brought back fond memories of reading your autobiography (is Vol. 3 out yet??). I have one question, though. Was Tom Scortia better known as Tom Rainbow—the author of some of *IAsfm*'s best Viewpoint articles? His was certainly a shining light in SF whose brilliance is still missed.

Another topic for your editorial research and comment might be the popularity of the multiple-volume story in the field of SF. The success of trilogies in our literature prove that there can never be too much of a well-done idea—we readers long for future visits to the wondrous places good writers take us. I can't think of any other form of literature where this is so. (I *don't* consider the current sequel-mania of some "popular" writers to be the same thing.)

Anyway, keep up the good work. It's obvious that *IAsfm* is *still* a pioneer in the field.

Be well,

Susan B. Feinberg
New York, NY

Tom Scortia and Tom Rainbow were separate individuals who are both now dead, alas. You must have missed my editorial on multiple-volume stories in the Mid-December 1986 issue. It was entitled "Science Fiction Series." —And Volume 3 of my autobiography is not yet out. I've got to finish living it first. If I make it to the end of the century, I intend to put it out then (it will give me an additional reason for living).

—Isaac Asimov

Sirs:

I would like to cast my vote for Achievement par Excellence for Walter Jon Williams's "Dinosaurs" (*IAsfm*, June 1987). Casting the Monsters of the Universe as our own human species advanced nine million years down the road of evolution was clever enough to capture my interest and my sympathy for their perspective. Casting the cute three-legged fuzzies as creatures not unlike ourselves but perhaps a million years more advanced was also a clever stroke that captured my sympathy for their perspective. The result was an

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altogether entertaining and thought provoking masterpiece, at least from my perspective. Is Walter Jon Williams another star rising to eclipse, perhaps, the venerable Dr. Asimov as science fiction author of the century? It almost moves me to rush right out and purchase *Voice of the Whirlwinds*.

Would that all of your presenters were as gifted and your presentations as dazzling! Alas! It is not so. Many a month have I browsed your magazine in vain for submissions as appealing as this, an honest to goodness first-rate science fiction effort. You have had your moments. "The Postman" comes to mind. I hope that you have many more such golden moments in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

Walter Yergen
Suitland, MD

Venerable, indeed. The fact is, I have only recently advanced from late youth to early middle age. Of course, I define these periods of life by a peculiar system of my own.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov & Mr. Dozois,

I just wanted to drop you a line and say thank you for the June '87 issue of *IAsfm*, which I enjoyed immensely. Since Gardner Dozois has taken over the editorship of the magazine it has improved one hundred percent. That is not to say that it was bad before—*IAsfm* has always been a good magazine—but now it has entered the realm of the great.

I would be hard pressed to choose any one story as the best of the issue but if I had to, it would have to be Walter Jon Williams's "Dinosaurs," which in my opinion will be a contender for the Hugo and Nebula awards. I hope that we can see more of his works in future issues.

If there was any one area where *IAsfm* is weak, it is the SF convention calendar. I agree with Amy Falkowitz, whose letter was printed in the June issue. A lot of times the information on upcoming conventions is late. I am sure that the fault does not lie with either Erwin S. Strauss or the magazine but rather with the convention organizers who are late with sending in the information to Mr. Strauss.

Once again thank you for a great issue. For only $2.00 where else in this day can someone find so much entertainment? If you guys don't stop putting out such great issues, I am going to have to break down and subscribe to *IAsfm*.

Sincerely,

Gil Pascual
Phoenix, Aridzona

PS: The Aridzona is not a typo.

"Aridzona" is even less of a nonmisprint than you think. The name of the state comes from the Spanish "arida zona," meaning "dry belt." And thank you for all your kind words.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Isaac,

In your July editorial, you and Shari Prange are both talking theory primarily; your rebuttal lists a few romances which are included in your science fiction novels, but

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weasels a bit on actual romance books. Let's have some facts; *have* science fiction authors been able to successfully write other forms of fiction?

I own six romance novels by Andre Norton, four by Phyllis Ann Karr, two by Ron Goulart, three by Anne McCaffrey (and several others by her have appeared in hard covers, which I don't have), four by Marion Zimmer Bradley, four by Gene DeWeese (who writes romances as "Jean" DeWeese), six by Juanita Coulson, and so on. Aside from Juanita's, I doubt if I own the complete romance output of anyone. So, can science fiction authors write romances? Of course; they do it all the time.

In addition, Lee Hoffman, with only two science fiction novels to her credit, won a Western Writers of America "Spur" Award for her *The Valdez Horses*. Michael Shaara, who wrote some pretty good science fiction back in the 1950s, took home a Pulitzer Prize for his *The Killer Angels*. Fredric Brown and John D. MacDonald were regarded as among the best mystery writers of their respective generations. L. Sprague de Camp has written historical novels as well as popular science books and his outstanding science fiction. Alfred Coppel, who was mostly restricted to *Planet* in his science-fiction days, is turning out highly regarded international-intrigue novels. Lee Hoffman has written at least three historical romances under a pseudonym. You yourself, John Brunner, Joe Hensley, and a good many other science fiction people are well-regarded mystery writers.

I think your contention that science fiction writers are capable of writing any other sort of book is pretty well proved, but I have more names if they're needed.

Yours,

Robert Coulson
Hartford City, IN

It works the other way around too. When people who are successful writers but are not primarily science fiction writers try *to write science fiction, they generally don't do very well. Their cake, in other words, is rather bready, if you know what I mean.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

In your editorial "Forgetfulness" (June) you say that the passage of fifty years hasn't dimmed your memory of John Campbell's story. Unfortunately, it has: although the specific incident that you base the editorial on is right, your description of the overall plot is totally wrong! Ironically, this is quite appropriate to your theme.

Henry Spencer
Toronto, Ont
Canada

Well, as I always say, my memory is pretty-near photographic. I can remember anything that's pretty near a photograph.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

First, I am a fan of yours and have many of your books. The Foundation Trilogy I have read and re-read many times. Your *Book of Facts* was my Christmas gift to

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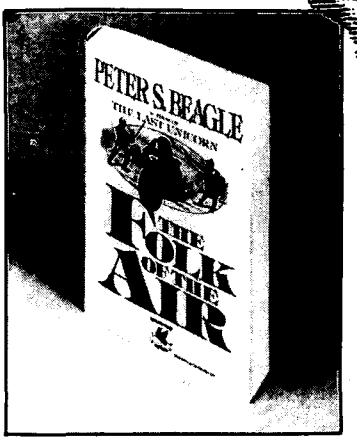

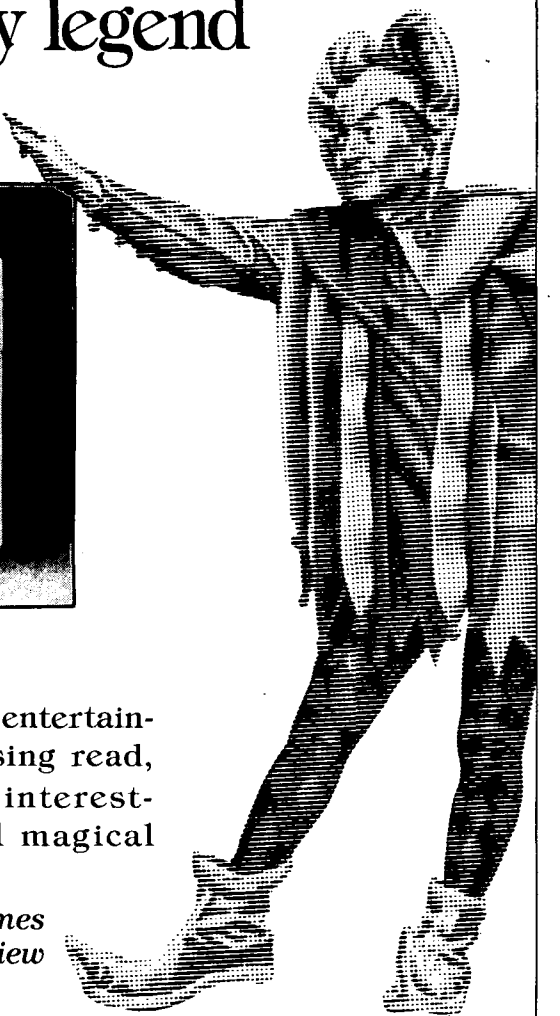

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my husband. But, in the June *IAsfm* you stated a fact that I question. How can you wipe out the pride and joy of a nation? How can you remove the most active controversy of two islands? I almost said pfui, but will change this to boo! I refer to your editorial on forgetfulness, page six, sentence: "No island of San Salvador exists on the map!" Really! May I send you three proofs to the contrary? You see, I live next door to San Salvador on Cat Island. In fact, in old maps Cat Island was called San Salvador. The dispute, as to which one of the two was the right "San Salvador" on which Columbus landed, has never ended here. Should you ever talk to a Cat Islander it would be better not to mention the Columbus monument on the next island. Cat Island has a "Columbus Point" to mark the real landing and an old Cat Islander told me, "The first thing Columbus saw was a cat; therefore the name."

I hope I have convinced you. It is quite a feeling to find a microscopic fault in an otherwise faultless, brave, handsome, intelligent, etc. (not to forget very modest) person! Without radio or TV books are IT for me, and I am still your fan.

Gili West
Port Howe, Cat Island
Bahamas

I'm sure that Watling Islanders consider their island to be San Salvador, but that's not proof, or even much in the way of evidence. You know—seven Greek cities claimed to be the birthplace of Homer but we still don't know where he was born, or even if he existed.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner:

I've been reading the packet of Nebula-nominated stories you sent; very impressive material. You're doing a damned good job with the magazine. Tell Joel to give you a raise.

As ever,

Ben Bova
West Hartford, CT

Joel gives deserved raises even without being told. —But I'll tell him anyway.

—Isaac Asimov

CLARION WEST ANNOUNCES 1988 WRITERS' WORKSHOP:

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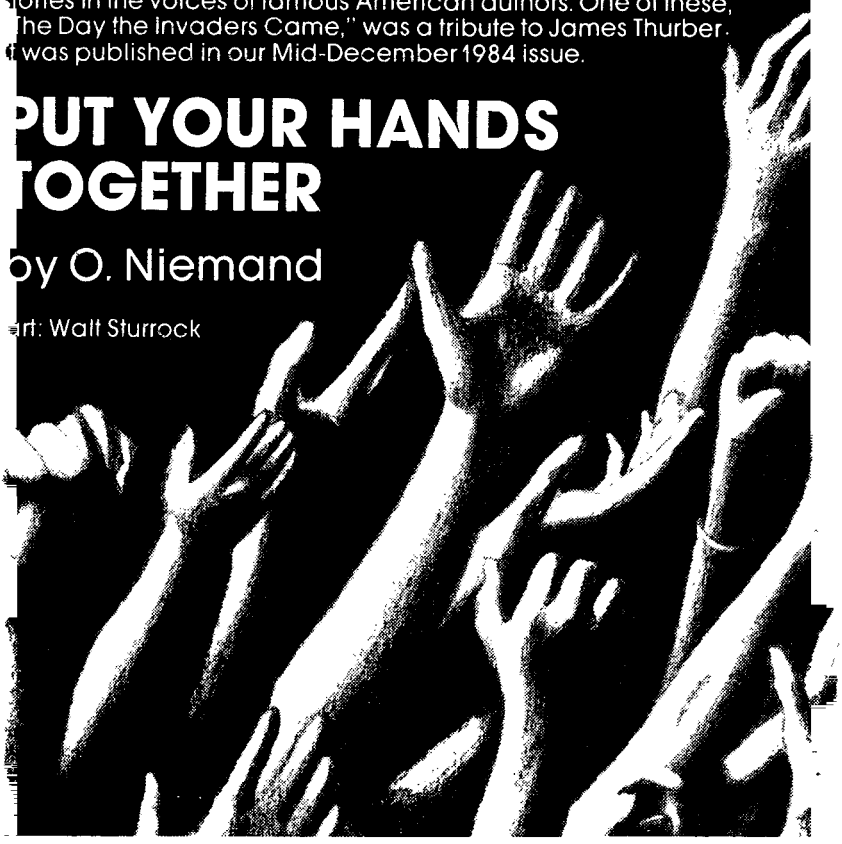
he author considers Flannery O'Connor to be one of the two best
ainstream American authors (Ernest Hemingway being the
ther), and "Put Your Hands Together" is an homage to her. O.
Niemand has written several other fascinating science fiction
ories in the voices of famous American authors. One of these,
he Day the Invaders Came," was a tribute to James Thurber.
was published in our Mid-December 1984 issue.

PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER

by O. Niemand

rt: Walt Sturrock



Mrs. Smyles didn't care much for the news channel, but she liked to read the bulletin board and hear about all the things that were happening in the dome. She didn't like the people in the dome, but she liked to know what they were doing. Mrs. Smyles was a tall woman, as thin and hard as a rake handle, with a withered arm and eyes that were always squinted in disgust at the sin and evil of this life. She was proud that she woke up every morning knowing where everything was and how everything ought to be, and she was amazed that nobody else ever seemed to know where anything was and how anything ought to be. Even in Bucktown

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where her neighbors were more level-headed than the people in the dome, Mrs. Smyles was sure that they'd all have long ago gone to the devil if they hadn't had her to keep them straight.

Her own sister, Ormanie, had this same peculiar blind spot. Ormanie was ten years younger than Mrs. Smyles and she had a curly-haired boy called Alphabet. Everybody called him that because he was named P. G. T. B. Kologhad after his daddy. His daddy had run off to live in the dome and he might as well be dead, as far as Mrs. Smyles was concerned. Nobody missed P. G. T. B. Senior much. The only good thing he had ever done was to trade some salvaged navigational equipment for a new hymnal and a straw hat with pink and yellow flowers on it. He gave the hat to Ormanie and the hymnal to Mrs. Smyles. He forgot to get something for his boy, Alphabet.

Mrs. Smyles and Ormanie lived in Bucktown, a tumbled heap of junked and ruined spacecraft left behind on the Old Field when the domed city of Springfield built the New Field. The sisters shared the large pressurized cabin of an obsolete yacht, a ship that would never sail again through the eternal night. The Old Field was connected to the dome by a tunnel a mile long built on the surface of the asteroid. Alphabet was always begging his mother to take him to the city, but Mrs. Smyles argued that only bad things could come of it. Alphabet was too young to see all the wickedness and corruption of the dome people. That would be terrible enough, but the worst was the possibility that he would come back to Bucktown with a secret liking for Springfield, and that someday he would go back there to stay, just like his daddy.

One morning Mrs. Smyles was watching the holoset, reading the notes on the bulletin board, when she called out, "Ormanie, honey, you come here and look at this!"

"I'm fixing breakfast," Ormanie said. "Alphabet didn't eat hardly nothing last night for supper."

"Well, this is something I think you ought to see. Hurry up before it goes away."

Ormanie let her breath out loudly and wiped her hands on a towel. "I'll be there terrectly," she said.

"It's high time you introduced Alphabet to the mysteries, sister. It's not right for a boy to grow up without knowing who made him."

Ormanie stared glumly at the holoset. "I made him, Verilee," she said. "Me and Mr. Kologhad." She sat on the arm of Mrs. Smyles's chair, her right leg crossed over her heavy thigh.

"Looky here. It's going to be a camp meeting in the dome today, at the St. Bernard Civic Auditorium. The preacher is Reverend Bobby Laws. I been hearing about him for a long time. I believe I'll go witness, and I'll be glad to take Alphabet with me. You don't have to come, Ormanie.

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I know how you feel about God." Mrs. Smyles gave her sister a look that was stiff with compassion.

Ormanie didn't want to get into an argument about God again. "You don't know how I feel about God," she said. "You don't know anything about it at all."

"You're one of the Lord's stray lambs, sister, that's all. You just haven't seen the light, but I still pray for you every day. Someday you'll welcome God into your heart and you'll be saved and all my praying will be rewarded, and I'll be the happiest person in Bucktown."

Ormanie let out a groan but didn't say anything. She stood up and went back into the kitchen. The bacon was done cooking, so she took it out of the skillet. She cracked three eggs into the bacon grease and fried them. Then she spooned some grits onto a cracked yellow china plate, added the bacon and eggs, then threw a cup of strong coffee into the leftover bacon grease and mixed it up. She poured the gravy over the grits and brought the plate to the table where Alphabet was waiting with a peeved look on his face. "What's this?" he asked.

"It's redeye gravy," said Ormanie. "You like redeye gravy."

"No, I don't." He picked up a piece of bacon and crushed it between his teeth. Ormanie waited, but Alphabet didn't give her any more trouble about the breakfast.

"What do you think?" asked Mrs. Smyles.

Ormanie looked at her. "What do I think about what?" She told herself that she needed the patience of a saint to live with the boy and her sister. They were lucky she didn't just put on her long brown cloth coat and leave them. She wasn't so old yet. She could find somebody who would marry her, somebody who would appreciate her cooking and how hard she worked. Nobody would blame her if she did.

"I been saying I'm going to this camp meeting, and I'll take Alphabet along if you want."

Ormanie said she didn't care one way or the other about the camp meeting. She said she didn't think Alphabet did, neither, but if Mrs. Smyles wanted to take him, Alphabet would probably enjoy going to the dome. "Well, Verilee," said Ormanie, "you're asking for trouble. The boy can be a pack of mischief when he wants to be."

"Nobody ever said the Lord's way got to be easy," said Mrs. Smyles. She didn't look at Ormanie when she spoke. She was still reading the messages on the holoset.

"I don't want to go to no camp meeting," said Alphabet. He had tiny white teeth and his eyes were too close together, but otherwise he was a good-looking child.

"You never been to one before," said Mrs. Smyles. "You don't even know what they're like."

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The boy turned in his chair. He had a mouthful of grits jammed into his cheeks and he looked like a greedy animal storing up food for winter. His eyes were narrowed and sullen. "I do too know about camp meetings," he said. His words came out smothered and hard to understand. "It's praying and preaching and getting baptized and whatall. I'd rather stay to home."

"You never been baptized," said Mrs. Smyles. "It can't hurt you none."

"What do you know about it?" asked Alphabet. He put another spoonful of grits and gravy into his mouth.

"I know more than you do," said Mrs. Smyles. She gave him a look that was supposed to let him know she was at perfect peace and contentment, thanks to her undying faith in the Lord.

"You do not," said Alphabet. He turned his back and picked up another piece of bacon.

"Ormanie, you shouldn't let the boy talk that way to his elders," said Mrs. Smyles.

"I can't stop him, can I?" she said. "I can't punish him before he says something, and after he says it, it's too late."

Mrs. Smyles opened her mouth to say something, but then decided against it. Ormanie allowed her boy to sass back if he took a mind to it, and there was nothing Mrs. Smyles could do about it. She could see right off that Alphabet was growing up just like his daddy, and he'd probably run off to Springfield and desert them both as soon as he got old enough.

Ormanie wasn't afraid of that. She always told Mrs. Smyles not to worry about it. "You know what will happen?" she said. "I'll tell you. Someday Alphabet will go to the city by himself. He's a normal boy, he's got a normal boy's curiosity. When he gets to the city, though, everybody's going to make fun of him. They're going to say 'Why, look at the jicky from Bucktown. Who let this jicky in here?' And poor Alphabet will come home crying, and he'll be proud to be a jicky and he'll never go to the dome again to his dying day."

"That what happened to you, Ormanie? People make fun of you? That why you never go to Springfield?"

Ormanie looked at her sister with a solemn expression. "Verilee," she said in a low voice, "I never told you all of what happened to me there, and I never will. You can just use your imagination, but I'm sure you couldn't think of half the awful things I saw."

Mrs. Smyles shook her head. "And those city folks made you proud to be a jicky," she said.

"Well, yes."

"The city's a terrible place, all right, but a good Christian ain't afraid to go anywhere. A good Christian knows he walks in the protection of the Lord. If you was a good Christian, things would've been different."

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"How, Verilee? All them people would've said the same things. All them people would've done the same things."

"Yes," said Mrs. Smyles with a look of a woman who has taught and taught and knows every lesson has been in vain, "but in the protection of the Lord none of the evil would've touched you. You would've come back home praising His name."

Ormanie looked at her and blinked a couple times. "Alphabet," she said, "you finish your grits and change your shirt. Your Aunt Verilee is taking you to the camp meeting this morning."

"She'll have to find me first," said Alphabet.

"Don't you mind him," said Ormanie. "He always talks like that."

"Don't I know it," said Mrs. Smyles.

While Ormanie packed some cold collard sandwiches for lunch, Mrs. Smyles put on a long black dress with a string of small plastic pearls and a broadbrimmed black felt hat with a white ribbon. She carried her hymnal and the sack of sandwiches in her good hand. Alphabet had on a pair of jeans and a red shirt that said Old Field Trash And Proud Of It.

"Are we ready?" asked Mrs. Smyles.

Alphabet rolled his eyes. "Mama, do I gotta?" he whined.

"You go with your Aunt Verilee and be good," said Ormanie. "If I hear you was a bad boy, you'll spend the night down in the dark engine room where the bogeyman lives. Now go have a good time."

"Don't you give him another thought," said Mrs. Smyles. She led Alphabet out of the cabin and through the airlock into the long tunnel that pointed toward the green dome of Springfield. "Alphabet," she said, "you carry these sandwiches for me. I only have one arm, you know, and I might need to use it. Take the book too."

"I'll go to the camp meeting with you," said the boy, "but I won't pray. Nobody can make me pray."

"That's right," said Mrs. Smyles, "nobody can make you pray. You don't have to pray if you don't want. But maybe when you get there and see how glad everybody is, how happy they all are praying, why, maybe you'll just join right in. Miracles still happen."

Alphabet was already peeking into the brown paper sack at the sandwiches. "She only made four, two for you and two for me. When are we going to eat?"

"After the prayer meeting. Now close up that sack. When I was a girl, just about as old as you are, it was coaches that ran along this rail here. You could ride for free, and the coaches ripped along without making a sound. If you closed your eyes, you didn't even know you was moving. It was like an angel carrying you between the Old Field and the dome."

"You been praying a long time, Aunt Verilee?"

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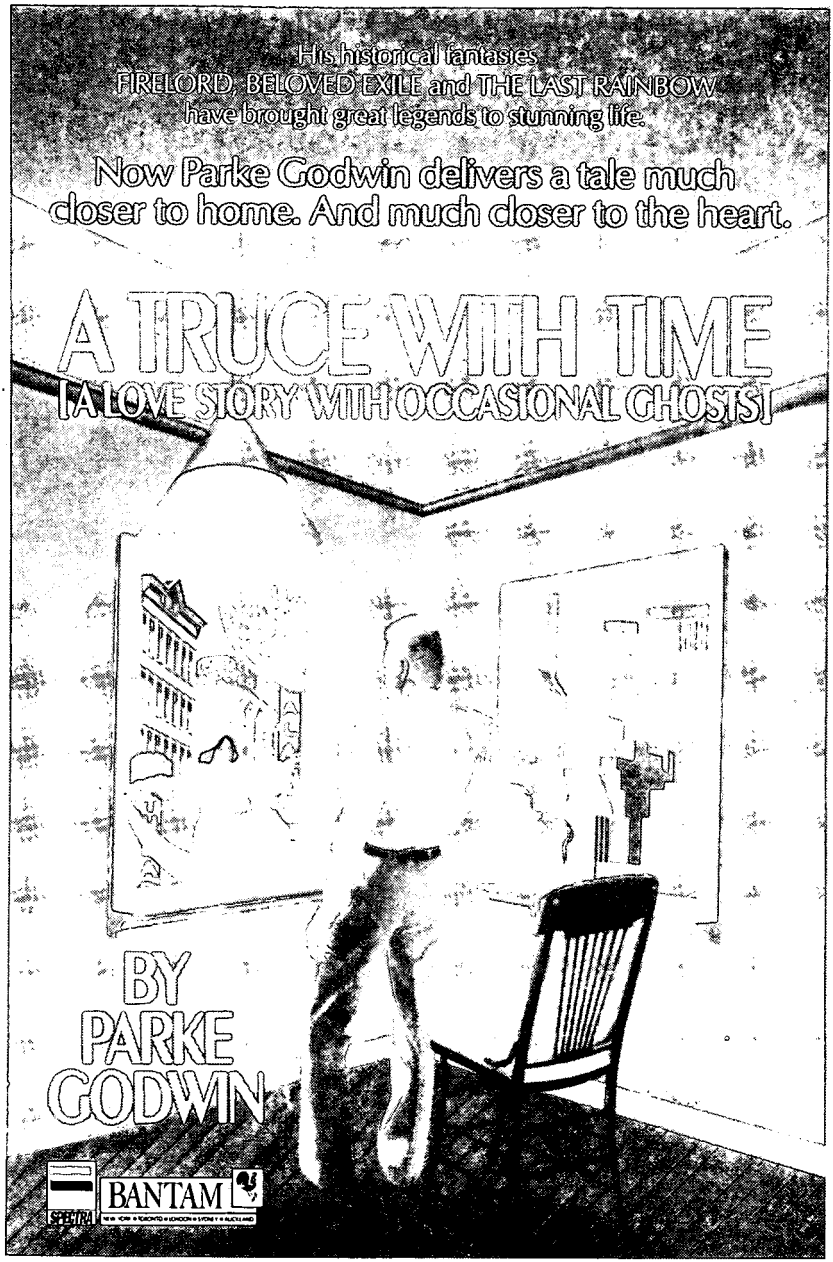

BY PARKE GODWIN

SPECTRA

BANTAM

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"All my life, I hope to tell you," said Mrs. Smyles. She gave Alphabet a warm look of satisfaction, the same look she wore at Easter Sunday service until her joints began to ache.

"And you're still waiting for an answer."

Mrs. Smyles's satisfied look went away. "Oh, I've had my answers," she said coldly. "I've had my answers. I don't need to pray for myself anymore, Alphabet, on account of I welcomed Jesus as my personal Savior. I pray for other people. *Other people*, Alphabet, who haven't learned yet how easy it is to be saved and how terrible it will be if they ain't." She shook her head sadly. "I expect someday my prayers for *other people* will be answered too, but it ain't nothing more I can do but pray for them."

They passed through a large, abandoned lobby and climbed up a frozen escalator. Before they stepped out onto the crowded street, Mrs. Smyles glanced at her reflection in a mirror. She straightened her black dress and tugged at her floppy hat. She tried on a blissful smile and a pious expression. She decided on a serious look that wouldn't invite conversation from strangers during the walk to the auditorium. "We can stop and look at all these store windows after the meeting," she told Alphabet, "but I don't want to be late." Alphabet didn't say a word. He had already promised himself that whatever happened, he wasn't going to be impressed by anything in Springfield. He was going to be bored by it all.

When they got to the St. Bernard Civic Auditorium, they found a sign directing them to Gate C. "C for Christ," said Mrs. Smyles.

The admission was free, but Reverend Bobby Laws's deacons were asking for a love offering to help in his good works. A deacon looked at Mrs. Smyles and Alphabet and said, "It's all right, sister. Just pass on through."

Mrs. Smyles said, "I don't have much money, young man, but what I do have is for the Lord to use in His way." She dropped a few coins into a basket half full of many-colored paper bills. The deacon gave her a heavy paper fan decorated with a picture of Jesus the Good Shepherd.

A large green and white striped tent had been set up on the floor of the auditorium. It was warm and still in the tent, and people were stirring up the air with their Good Shepherd fans. An usher helped Mrs. Smyles and Alphabet find seats.

"What are all these folks here for, Aunt Verilee?" asked Alphabet.

There were hundreds of people waiting on hard benches in front of a raised wooden pulpit. "They're here because they love God," said Mrs. Smyles. "Or else they're terrible sinners who've been brought here to be washed."

"Washed how?"

"In the blood of the Lamb."

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"Yuck," said Alphabet.

A man in a plum-colored suit sat next to Mrs. Smyles. He took off his hat and leaned forward in a little bow. "Name's Doggett, missus. Vessel Doggett. I trade in valves and gaskets of all kinds, retail and to the trade, had my own business now for fifteen years."

"How do," said Mrs. Smyles.

"I see you've got a withered arm."

"You see right," said Mrs. Smyles.

Mr. Doggett looked at her and closed one eye to let her know he was speaking in absolute sincerity. "It's one true thing you can say about life, and it's everybody's got a cross to bear. You got your withered arm. I got a back it won't let me do no lifting nor carrying and a wife at home with inflagrations of every bone in her body. I'll bet your boy here got something wrong with him too."

Mrs. Smyles looked at the man in the plum-colored suit, blinking and frowning. "He ain't my boy," she said.

Mr. Doggett said, "I didn't mean nothing by it, lady. He sure is a good-looking boy."

"She ain't my mama," said Alphabet. "She's my Aunt Verilee."

Mr. Doggett smiled. "Verilee. Now I think that's just the prettiest name." He closed his eye again in a wink.

Mrs. Smyles's expression grew sterner. "I'll thank you to watch how you talk. That's just how my husband started on me, and I ain't fool enough to listen to it from you too."

"Your husband must be a powerful lucky man."

"Last I heard, he'd taken up blerd ranching on Shukran. Mr. Smyles knows less about ranching than my daddy's dead cat. Serve him right if he spends the rest of his days sweeping out barns."

"You don't keep blerds in barns," said Mr. Doggett.

"A lot I care," said Mrs. Smyles.

Alphabet tugged on her sleeve and pointed. "What's that?" he asked, nodding toward a low canvas pool beside the pulpit. "Is that for the baptizing?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Smyles. She watched as two men set up a stepladder beside the pool. She remembered her baptizing, forty years ago, how she'd felt as if all her sins had come off in the water and had floated away. As she got older, new sins blackened her and were harder to wash off. She knew that God pardoned her every sin, but she never again felt as clean and pure as after her baptizing. She never felt really forgiven. "Maybe you'll hear the call today, boy. Maybe today's the day you'll open yourself to the Lord and be baptized. It would make your mama so happy."

"My mama don't give a damn about it," said Alphabet. Mrs. Smyles

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pressed her lips together hard and looked back at the front of the congregation.

In a little while a minister came into the tent and climbed up on the platform. "Is that him?" asked Mrs. Smyles. "Is that Reverend Bobby Laws?" She thought the man was too thin and nice-looking to be much of a preacher. Bobby Laws was supposed to be able to strike divine fire from his first word to his last.

"No," said Mr. Doggett in a low voice, "that's the Reverend Vriner. He's a pretty good preacher and he's hard on backsliders, but he ain't no Bobby Laws."

"I guess I can see that," said Mrs. Smyles. She fanned herself and settled back to listen to Reverend Vriner. The meeting was just beginning, and men and women were still coming into the auditorium. The people on the benches were whispering and coughing. Mrs. Smyles looked around with disapproval. She hit Alphabet on the back of his head and said, "Sit still!" although he wasn't making any noise. He was just the only person she could reach.

Reverend Vriner let his gaze travel from one side of the gathering to the other. He had a fierce look in his eyes, as if he had been sent out single-handed to convert a world full of Christian-eating savages. "How many people we got here today who'll give the Lord their vote? Say amen!"

There was a mild "Amen!" from the assembly.

Reverend Vriner smiled sadly and shook his head. "Seems the Lord ain't got many friends here in Springfield. I said how many people here today'll give the Lord their vote? Say amen!"

The response was a good deal louder this time. Mrs. Smyles shouted it out. Alphabet sat slump-shouldered on the bench with a weary look on his face.

"It's some better," said Reverend Vriner. "I can see we got our work to do. I want to tell you what it was like being lost and ignorant. I want to tell you what my life was like before I met up with the Reverend Bobby Laws and found God."

Someone in the crowd yelled "Hallelujah!" Reverend Vriner smiled and said, "Glory! Praise Jesus, brother! I used to be like some of you. I thought I knew what preachers meant when they said salvation. I thought I knew it all. But I'm here to tell you I didn't know. I'm here to tell you that you don't know, neither. No, not until the power of God lights your heart can you see the truth. That's the first gift you get from God, the knowledge of how wrong you been. Once you seen that, my friends, once you seen how terribly wrong you been, then it ain't nothing to do but come and get cleansed in the holy tears and blood of Jesus Christ."

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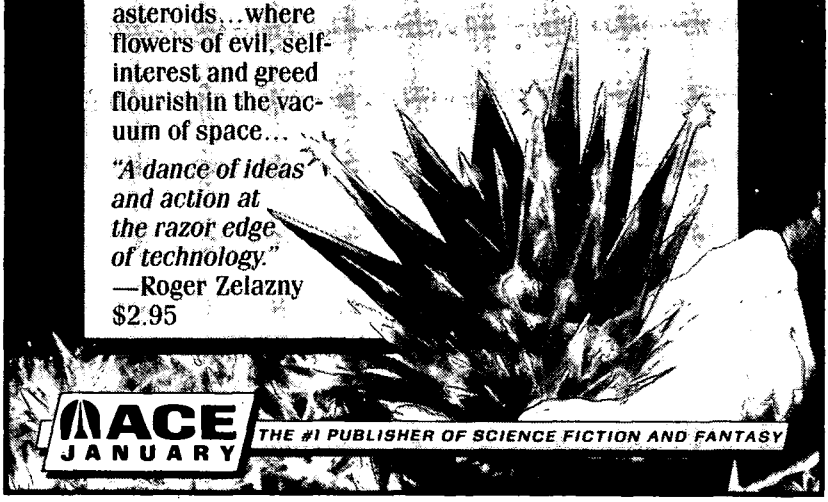

ACE JANUARY

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"Yuck," said Alphabet.

"Pay attention," muttered Mrs. Smyles. "The man is talking to you."

"I ain't heard my name yet," said the boy.

The man in the plum-colored suit leaned over and whispered, "If you'll excuse me, missus, it seems to me that your weazened arm ain't the half of your troubles."

Mrs. Smyles sat up straighter. "The boy ain't no trouble," she said. "One day he'll hear the Word of the Lord, and it will give me so much joy, it will all be worth it."

Mr. Doggett looked at her silently for a moment. "You really fancy the preaching, don't you?" he said at last. He seemed astonished, as if a camp meeting was the last place he'd expected to meet someone like her.

"I haven't missed saying my prayers, morning and night, in more than forty years," said Mrs. Smyles.

"And you're proud of it, too!" The man's surprise had turned to amusement.

"If you ain't here to testify," said Mrs. Smyles coldly, "what are you here for?"

Mr. Doggett winked at her. "Christians need gaskets every bit and grain as much as normal people," he said.

Mrs. Smyles turned away and paid the man no more attention. The minister finished his exhortation and began inventing a hymn, thinking up one line while the congregation repeated the last one. "We'll suffer not in Glory, we'll leave our cares below," he sang. "We'll know but joy and comforting, when to Paradise we go."

Mrs. Smyles put her fan on her lap and clapped her hand on her leg until the improvised hymn ended. She called out "Amen!" and picked up her Good Shepherd fan. Her peaceful expression faded again as she gloomily contemplated the sinful company around her.

Reverend Vriner raised his arms high over his head. "Brothers and sisters, I want you to put your hands together! I want you to put your hands together one time, because now we're going to bring out somebody who *knows* how to rock your soul, somebody who *knows* how to lift your heart! Put your hands together one time for the Reverend Bobby Laws!"

"Now you're sure going to hear something," said Mr. Doggett. "Now you're going to hear some real preaching. If it's any sinful secret you don't want folks to know about, you best get aholt of it tight, because Bobby Laws can drag it clean out of a body."

"Sinful secret," said Mrs. Smyles contemptuously.

The people on the benches near the pulpit began to clap their hands. Mrs. Smyles leaned forward to see, but a woman in yellow overalls jumped up and blocked her view. She reached forward and tapped the

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woman on the arm. "Pardon me," she said. The woman ignored her. Mrs. Smyles tapped her again. "Pardon me," she said in a louder voice.

"Stand up, Miss Verilee," said Mr. Doggett. "Won't none of these people sit down 'til Bobby Laws lets 'em sit down."

"It ain't right for a preacher to stir such a ruckus," said Mrs. Smyles. She stood up and pulled Alphabet to his feet too. She could see the pulpit if she looked over the shoulder of the woman in the yellow overalls. "It's the gospel should get the welcome, not the man."

"Aunt Verilee," said Alphabet, "it ain't no man."

At last Mrs. Smyles caught sight of the Reverend Bobby Laws. He was a humanoid creature with skin the color of the water in Lake Lee in City Park. His legs were very long and thick, like tree trunks. His arms were attached at strange angles to his small body, and his hands hung down to his knees. His blue face was smiling, but the glitter in his black compound eyes frightened Mrs. Smyles. "Dear Lord," she murmured.

"Hee hee," cackled Mr. Doggett. "I just love to see the looks on their faces! Surprised you, didn't he? You should see the look on your face!"

"Sweet Jesus, he's a prytanian," murmured Mrs. Smyles. She sat down slowly on the bench. Her Good Shepherd fan fell to the floor.

The alien preacher held up his hands for quiet. "I'm Bobby Laws," he said. "I've preached on twenty worlds in the last month, and now I'm happy to be here on Springfield. What can I do for you folks?" He was well-spoken but a little hoarse.

Mrs. Smyles sat on the bench feeling as if her throat were closing up. She watched the woman in yellow overalls lift herself up on her toes, then come back down, then lift herself up again. People were shouting on all sides. Bobby Laws's words soared over the clamor and came to Mrs. Smyles as if they were aimed at her alone. He sounded more intelligent than most prytanians, but one look had been enough to convince her that he was an ungodly mockery of a human being, a fraud and a wicked impostor.

Mrs. Smyles sat on the edge of the bench with her good hand pressed tightly in her lap. A part of her wanted to stand up and march out of the tent and out of the auditorium, but another part of her was mesmerized by this blue creature that called itself a minister of the Lord. "Blaspheming the holy Scriptures," she muttered.

"Here comes a miracle, missus, hee hee!" Mr. Doggett was enjoying her distress. "The convicted and the afflicted, they're fighting each other to be first. Maybe you should come forward too. Maybe you should take your awful old arm on up and let that there Bobby Laws speak some words over it."

Mrs. Smyles did not relax her stiff posture. "I thank you to stop mentioning my arm, Mr. Doggett."

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"You can just call me Vessel, it ain't no reason we can't be friends." He looked at her with his head tilted a little. "What I tell you? Hee hee! Here comes the miracle, just like I said!"

The Reverend Bobby Laws came down from the pulpit and raised his hands for quiet. "It won't be no miracles," said Mrs. Smyles. "It's all profanity and swindles."

The woman in the yellow overalls turned around and gave her an angry look. "If all you jickies come for was to scoff," she said, "why didn't you just stay to home?"

Mrs. Smyles felt her face grow hot. "I surely didn't come to scoff, but it's my Christian duty to protect this boy. It ain't no camp meeting, it's an abomination in the eyes of the Lord."

Two deacons carried a stretcher up the aisle to the front of the gathering. An old brown woman lay on the stretcher, frail as a bundle of dry sticks. Bobby Laws knelt beside her, and she lifted her head to whisper in his ear. The preacher stood up and looked out at the assembly. "This good woman is eaten up with cancer," he said. "She believes in the power of God. She doesn't know a thing about the power of Bobby Laws. My friends, let me tell you one secret: Bobby Laws don't *have* no power. No sir. Y'all came to see Bobby Laws work wonders, but now you got to hear the plain truth: Bobby Laws *can't* work no wonders. This woman has cancer, and I truly wish I could heal her. I wish I could just lay my hands on her and make her whole, take away her pain, give her back her strength and spunk. But I can't, brothers and sisters, because I'm only a preacher, and preachers can't do miracles."

"Shoot," said Mr. Doggett. "This ain't what I come to see." He spat on the floor.

"I'm only a man," said the Reverend Bobby Laws, "and men can't do miracles."

"He ain't no man," said Mrs. Smyles angrily. "He ain't no preacher and he ain't no man. Men are created in God's image, men and women, but not blue-skinned devils that quote Scripture when it serves their purpose. It's a sin just to listen to him. He can talk, but that don't make him human. Prytanians don't have souls, just like beasts and birds and serpents don't have souls."

"You best hush up, Miss Verilee," said Mr. Doggett. "I'm warning you for your own good. Lots of folks around here come to hear him talk."

"You tell her," said the woman in the yellow overalls. "You ought to tell your friend to shut her goddamn mouth."

Mrs. Smyles was furious. "How dare you talk to me that way?" she cried.

Bobby Laws glanced toward the disturbance. "It's only God that can do miracles," he said. "Only God in His infinite love can work a healing.

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FIRST CAME
COBRA
THEN
COBRA STRIKE
AND NOW...

COBRA BARGAIN

TIMOTHY ZAHN

It is the year 2474. Corwin Moreau, now 55, is governor of Aventine, but the fact that the Moreau family has held power for so long is beginning to generate bad feelings in the Cobra Worlds Council. The Moreaus' contributions to the colony's success are fading in the light of an anti-Cobra political faction.

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BAEN BOOKS

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But sometimes, my friends, God chooses to work through a poor sinner like me." He rested his three-fingered hand on the old woman's forehead. "Sister, do you believe in the power of the Lord? Do you have faith, not in me, but in Him? I'm asking you to forget everything you've ever heard about Bobby Laws, because Bobby Laws is just a speck in the Lord's great plan. Do you love Jesus, sister? Do you trust in God?"

The sick woman lifted a hand and let it fall back to the stretcher.

Bobby Laws bent close to her. "Jesus told the paralyzed man, 'Rise, take up your pallet and go home.' And he rose and took up the pallet and went out before them all, so that they were all amazed and glorified God, saying, 'We never saw anything like this!' "

"This is sacrilege," said Mrs. Smyles.

The brown, shrunken woman on the stretcher clutched Bobby Laws's arm and slowly pulled herself up. Tears sparkled like diamonds on her dark face. Shouts of "Hallelujah!" came from the crowd.

"It's a trick!" said Mrs. Smyles. Her fist was clenched, ready to battle everything in the world she hated and feared. "It ain't no healing! It's a lie and a cheat!"

With Bobby Laws's help, the weak invalid woman got to her feet. She was as unsteady as a newborn deer, but her eyes shone with wonder. "I don't hurt," she said in a quavering voice. "Praise Jesus!"

Mrs. Smyles was numb with outrage. "He's a devil and it's all fakery!" she said.

The woman in yellow overalls slapped her and Mrs. Smyles reeled back. Mr. Doggett got to his feet and slapped the woman in yellow. "It ain't no cause for you to hit her," he said. The woman's husband, a little man with thin black hair and sullen eyes, tried to grab Mr. Doggett around the neck.

"Who . . . do . . . you . . . *think*—" demanded Mrs. Smyles. She swung her good arm and struck the woman a light blow on the shoulder. Deacons and ushers hurried to break up the scuffle. The woman in yellow pushed Mrs. Smyles, and she fell over onto Alphabet. Mr. Doggett helped her up. "Don't pay her no more mind," he said. "Maybe you best go on home."

"I'll go," said Mrs. Smyles breathlessly, "and it'll be a cold day before I come back here."

"Missus," said one of the deacons, "your boy is hurt."

Alphabet lay on the floor between the benches, an ugly dark line of blood running from his head. Mrs. Smyles gave a stifled shriek and bent over him.

"He ain't breathing, ma'am," said an usher.

Mrs. Smyles straightened and pointed at the woman in yellow. "You killed my sister's boy," she said. "He's dead and you killed him."

"Missus," said the deacon, "he like to talk to you."

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Reverend Bobby Laws came up to Mrs. Smyles. She stared at him in mute rage. His faceted eyes made him look like a demon that had come to snatch poor Alphabet down to Hell. He murmured some comforting words that didn't fool her for a minute. Slowly all the horror leaked out of her, and she just looked at him and couldn't say a word.

"Are you all right?" asked Bobby Laws.

"What am I going to say to Ormanie?" asked Mrs. Smyles.

"Do you believe in the power of the Lord, sister?"

Mrs. Smyles gave him a thin smile. "I believe in the power of the Lord, all right," she said. "What I don't believe in is you."

Bobby Laws nodded solemnly. "If you want me to, I think I can give you back your boy."

Mrs. Smyles gasped. "Resurrect the boy? Raise the dead? Like Jesus?" The blasphemy of the suggestion overwhelmed her.

"He done it before, missus," said the deacon. "I seen him."

"Sometimes God works through me," said Bobby Laws, spreading his hands. He shrugged.

Mrs. Smyles took a step backward. "I've never heard nothing so evil," she said.

The preacher looked into her eyes. "You're not afraid of me, sister," he said softly. "You're afraid of the real greatness of God. You're afraid there's more to the mysteries than just singing songs and saying prayers."

"You can have the boy back," said the deacon, "good as new."

"I'm a good Christian," Mrs. Smyles insisted.

"You ought to ask yourself if you really believe in anything at all," said Bobby Laws.

Mrs. Smyles covered her mouth with her hand and turned away. She pushed through the people and ran out of the tent. A block from the auditorium she found a small coffee shop. She went in and sat in a red vinyl booth. She stared out the window, and tears ran down her cheeks.

"Can I get you something, lady?" asked the waitress.

"No," said Mrs. Smyles, "thank you."

"Something wrong? You're crying."

Mrs. Smyles dabbed at the tears. "Nothing," she said. "I lost my book of hymns. I left it behind. I been having that book for years." The waitress let her sit in the booth without ordering anything. Mrs. Smyles watched the traffic go by in the street, and after a while her tears just stopped falling. ●

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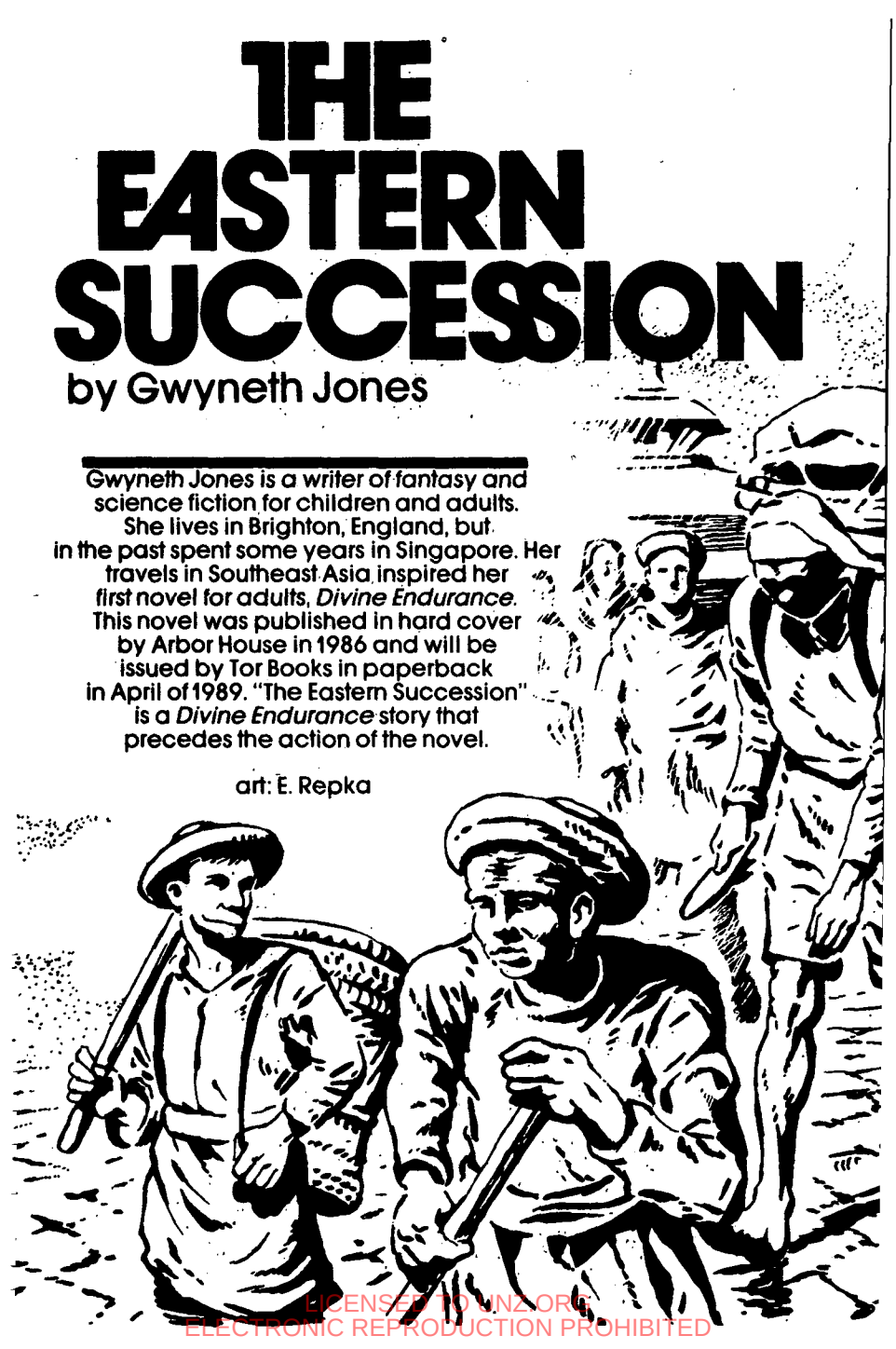
THE EASTERN SUCCESSION

by Gwyneth Jones

Gwyneth Jones is a writer of fantasy and science fiction for children and adults. She lives in Brighton, England, but in the past spent some years in Singapore. Her travels in Southeast Asia inspired her first novel for adults, *Divine Endurance*. This novel was published in hard cover by Arbor House in 1986 and will be issued by Tor Books in paperback in April of 1989. "The Eastern Succession" is a *Divine Endurance* story that precedes the action of the novel.

art: E. Repka



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In the year 480 Ranganar, 2022 of the old count, there was a dynastic failure in the federation of Timur Kering. Our prince died, and there was no heir male to take his place. A prince plays an important role in traditional Peninsulan government. He is the ceremonial and in some ways the practical head of state: the symbol of his family's mandate to rule. Therefore a new royal family must be chosen—one approved by the whole nation, not just the Federation of Timur.

And so the remaining powers of the Peninsula gathered on Temple Mountain "in between five princedoms," under the eyes of our brutal caretakers the Koperasi, to debate the eastern succession.

There were three candidates. The ancient Bangau clan should have taken precedence, except that the only prince they could offer was an infant. This implied a Koperasi regency which would face dangerous popular resistance. There was an elder Bangau. But his mother had changed her house, to escape the restrictions placed on dissenters of rank. He was being offered as the candidate of her new family. The young man, Ida Bagus Sadia, was reported to be beautiful, intelligent, and good. It made no difference. His pedigree was null and void: no orthodox Peninsulan would vote for him. The Siamangs, who offered the third candidate, had never been involved in unrest. Nor were they burdened by ages of tradition. They were supposed to have connections with contraband trading. But this did not make them less acceptable to the Koperasi, or to the people. The man, Gusti Ketut Siamang, was strong and healthy and had fathered children (an important point). He was the obvious choice. Not only for the people of Timur, but for anyone interested in change and progress.

My family allowed me to go to the debate as an observer. The result was almost certain, but not quite. Even with the Koperasi looking on, various feuds and loyalties would be simmering under the surface. Jagdana, the elegant western princedom, might favor Ida Bagus Sadia, the good young man. For Sadia's mother was a dissenter, and Jagdana sympathized (discreetly) with the lost cause of independence. The Gamarthans of the north, fierce and narrow traditionalists, might support the Bangau infant—if only to oppose Jagdana. Or perhaps with a view to controlling the regency themselves; an idea that made me shudder.

The third vote was Timur's, and safe. The fourth belonged to the aneh, called the "polowijo" in the west. The Peninsula's cripples, freaks of nature: the aneh were powerless, but their "vote" was a matter of tradition. They usually followed Jagdana. The fifth vote had once belonged to the Garuda family, our native sovereigns over all the Peninsula. But the Garudas had been wiped out in the Last Rebellion. It could now be counted as belonging to the half-rebel criminal gangs. The bandits could

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make large areas of Timur ungovernable, if they were not satisfied, and no one wants to be ungovernable. It is what the Garudas were.

I arrived at Canditinggi, the town on temple pass, with all these complications at my fingertips, on an afternoon of black, streaming rain. Desperate clinging cantilevered streets lurched up and down all around me (after effects of the "night express" transport). There was a smell of wet cabbage. The view, which should have been staggering, was entirely obliterated by cloud: Timur below me, Jagdana at my back and about a hundred batu south the towering cones of Bu Awan, where the aneh live. The roadway was cobble and mud, packed with sedan chairs and animals. The public buildings showed raw scars where the wings of the Garuda eagle had been defaced—as if the Rebellion had happened yesterday. The crowd swept around me: giggling servants, Koperasi patrollers, hangers-on, criminals, beggars, spies. Three veiled figures slipped down from their chairs, and vanished into a closed courtyard. Everyone dutifully looked the other way, except for me and the Koperasi. The women who run our native governments are intensely secretive. I stared at the broken wings of Garuda, defiant badges of mourning: I knew I had made a mistake.

I was right! They wouldn't let me in. My letters of introduction were useless. I, a man, could not possibly enter any of the Dapur courts while the debate was in session. Not even behind a screen like an unwanted piece of furniture? No. "It wouldn't mean anything to you" they told me. "The Dapur is the hearth. There is no place for a man there." And (worse) "Perhaps later . . . Perhaps . . ." Am I a wild animal? When I was fourteen the last of my sister-mothers died. I fled our conservative neighbors, not to mention our own faithful servants, and flung myself on the mercy of distant connections in Timur. They were kind to me. They even sent me to college in Sepaa, the Koperasi city. But my education was no use to me here, stranded in the heart of the old traditional Peninsula. Simpering doe-eyed servant boys tripped after the Dapur ladies. If I were like them, I could go in. In my frustration I contemplated castrating myself on the spot.

It was night before I gave up and started hunting for a place to stay. In the morning the inn I had moved into turned out to be a disreputable collection of palm thatch shacks, sharing an unpaved compound with a brothel—in the tail of the town where it trailed away into steep bedraggled fields. I didn't like the look of the other customers at all. But when I tried to move out everywhere was "phuull-." The two forms of Inggris are actually two different languages. Perversely the debate town was using "High Inggris" which is the speech of our Rulers; when I spoke in our own tongue the Canditinggi women refused to understand my accent. They were not impressed by money—"Koperasi paper. What good that?"

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Women's eyes followed me everywhere with implacable suspicion: staring at my city clothes, the shoes on my feet. A respectable man, they told me, does not travel alone. I was stuck. And, as I had suspected, I was lodging in a den of thieves.

It was their country too, why should they not be interested in the debate? Having no papers at all "permisi travel" didn't worry them. The brigands had come from all over Timur: swaggering at night in the back alleys, loafing about by day in low dives like mine. The security patrols that roared around the town day and night, murdering chickens and fouling the streets with the alien stink of hydrocarbon, took no notice. Koperasi law and order has no real quarrel with organized crime. After dark my inn was like a pasar malam—a night market: young men preening themselves and posing under the sizzling white lamps; whispered dealing in corners. Short lived, bold-eyed, wild-haired—in other times they would all have been boys and safe at home. But we seem to be returning to a state of nature where unneeded males are simply driven away, to strut and fight and die like falling flowers in the wilderness.

But these bravos were not entirely abandoned. They had a guardian. I met her on my second night in the town: a lean young woman with a cadaverous dark face, dressed like the bandits in coarse silk breeches and a vivid embroidered jacket. It was raining hard. About ten of them were sprawled around the empty hearth in the common room, drinking beer under the notice that said no alcohol could be served to Peninsulans (she wasn't drinking, of course). Someone had been very wicked. The dark woman was the bandits' conscience, trying to persuade them to face up to the villain. But she didn't nag. She recognized that even fierce ogres can sometimes feel small and helpless.

"As for me, I don't have any support at the moment. But when I do, I plan to withdraw it immediately."

They laughed in relief. "Me too, me too." "As soon as ever—." "I'm just going to walk right up to him—"

Watching, and wondering about the woman, I didn't notice I had company. Suddenly there was a grubby red and gold sash in front of my face, with the ornate hilt of a knife sticking out of it.

"D'you like it?"

If I stood up we would be practically mouth to mouth. He must have come up on me like a cat. I was horrified. I knew from experience nothing I could say would be right.

"I said, d'you like my knife? What's the matter, boy? Does little bottom think it's too pretty to talk to me?"

I flushed crimson, ridiculously. "I am not a boy."

The demon grinned broadly, eyed my lap; stroked his knife hilt. "Not a boy, eh?—"

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The race goes on—faster than light!

ROGER ZELAZNY'S ALIEN SPEEDWAY

PITFALL BY THOMAS WYLDE

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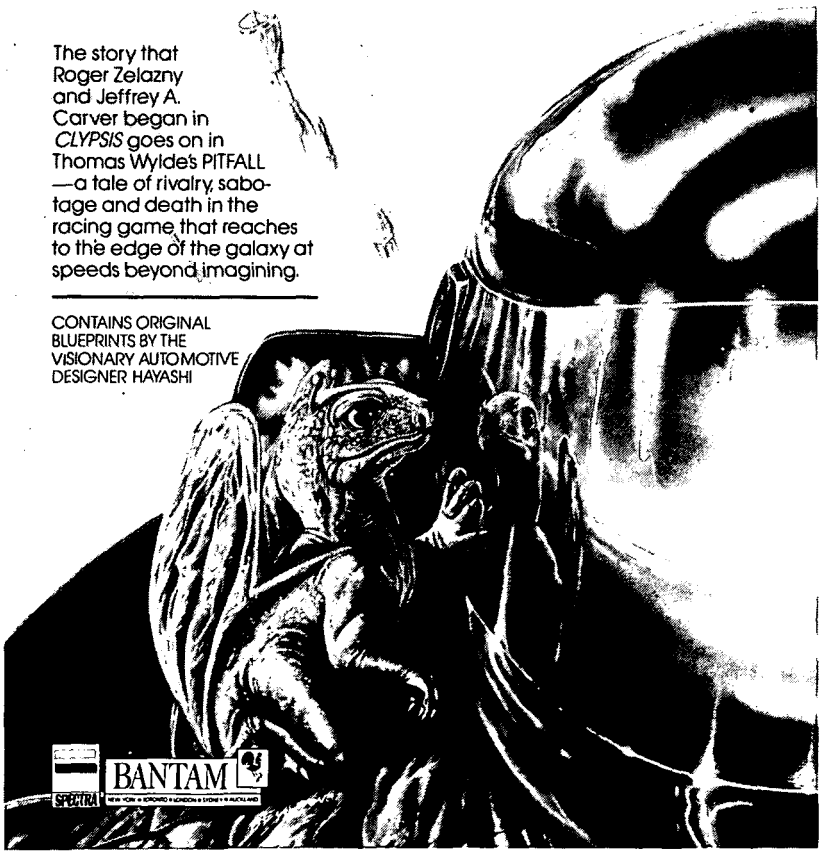

SPECTRA BANTAM

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"Leave him alone, Tjakil. He's a stranger, he doesn't mean to offend."

The dark young woman smiled, almost diffidently. My suitor, after a moment's hesitation, shrugged his shoulders and stalked away.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you, madam. It was good of you."

"It's nothing. It is just that I know their names. Names are magic, you know. I suppose your people are staying in town?"

I had spoken in our language: she followed. I was surprised to hear a cultivated voice, without a trace of dialect.

"No. I'm here by myself. I am an observer."

"Oh." She frowned, but kept the rest back. I was grateful that she didn't say I ought not to be alone.

"My name is Endang. I am from Timur."

She smiled again, brilliantly. "My name is Derveet."

But names are magic. Neither of us, I noticed, chose to mention a family.

From her pure accent, and her habit of bowing slightly over every most minute social transaction, I judged she had been brought up in Jagdana, in a high caste family. But her skin was dark, she stood out among the bandits like a black smudge on gold leaf. She was here in Canditinggi, I discovered, with the aneh—a tiny delegation. Apart from Derveet it consisted of the Dapur delegate and two deformed boys called Snake and Buffalo. Derveet, evidently, was a "failed woman"—that is, she had been proved barren, the worst crime a woman can commit. The Dapur, the hearth and life of the house, has no use for such cripples. She was not entitled to the robes, she could not join in this debate. The delegate herself, an abnormally tall woman with an ugly pigment deficiency, had little respect for the rules of the Dapur. She was often in our common room, hitching up the irksome veils to show expanses of red scurfy limbs, giving her report in an abrasive carrying voice that had had plenty of use. Unfortunately she had nothing to say, beyond that it was all stupid and she didn't understand what was going on.

They were both far more interested in the grievance I had heard Derveet discussing. A bandit of some importance, known as "Durjana," had been selling sub-standard contraband drugs to the aneh. The freaks were deeply impressed by "Koperasi medicine": couldn't be prevented from using the stuff, and they were dying. From the way the two spoke, it was a serious problem.

Snake, the younger boy, was just a child. He had a light agile body and speaking eyes, but he had no lips, no teeth—only smooth gums in a narrow elongated jaw, and a useless little ribbon of a tongue. In repose his mouth was a single folded line, curled in a reptile's permanent crooked smile. Buffalo boy seemed luckier. The lumps on his temples didn't bother

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him, his husky shoulders were useful; his hands only a little clumsy. But calfism is a progressive defect. By the time he was twenty he would have no human face, only an animal's muzzle. He would not speak. His fingers would have clotted into leathery clubs, and his enlarged heart would be worn out under the strain of the overdeveloped torso. He was Derveet's lieutenant, always at her elbow: "Madam, you'd better come—" "Madam, they are fighting again—." The day after I met his mistress I found him trotting beside me as I went into town. He wouldn't leave me: "Madam says—." He was shocked that I had been allowed to come here with no servant of my own. I tried to explain to him that it was a compliment, and I was proud, but that was beyond him. The single state is not understood: he pressed my hand tenderly, and avoided the painful subject.

Days of trudging up and down in the cold mountain drizzle, and fruitless argument. Nights of watching Derveet and the aneh in patient, useless struggle with the bandits. . . . Then one night there was a major development. The accused himself arrived, with an entourage of gangster courtiers. Everyone sat up around the dining table for a formal confrontasi.

The wicked Durjana was quite beautiful, with shining black curls, golden muscles, and a smiling, innocent mouth. He had come, he said, out of respect for Derveet and "so everybody would listen and be satisfied." On the Peninsula, such a promising start was doomed.

"You know I don't like quarrels, 'Jana, but when someone tries to murder me it hurts, you know. It hurts."

"It wasn't you. It was only aneh down the back of the mountain. Stupid people."

"My family, 'Jana. My family is me. Have you forgotten that? Aren't you a Peninsulan?"

"My family is the KKK," muttered Durjana sulkily.

They were speaking in High Inggris. Sometimes I lost the thread, but I caught that name. KKK stands in our language for Fan, Paper, Cloth. It was the name of a criminal organization said to control most of the "illegal" trade in Timur. I had been eating with the bandits when this discussion began. I had lingered out of curiosity; and no one seemed to mind. Now I was afraid to leave. The mention of KKK had implications—. I drew back, hoping to blend into the shadows.

I thought I saw Derveet look my way and faintly smile. But immediately her attention was back with Durjana.

"But what family does the KKK belong to? Are you really part of that 'family' which is killing my people?"

"That's not true!"

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"But the KKK gave you the bad drugs. Where did the drugs come from?"

"What drugs? I did not trade the drugs. When did I say so? Tell me who is lying about me! Bring them here!"

Oh, it was hopeless. The smooth and bottomless waters of Peninsulan confusion closed overhead. I understood by now what had happened. The drugs must have been antibiotics—a class of medicine forbidden by the Dapur as being "too extreme." Antibiotics are ineffective at high altitudes, and that was the whole story. But it was lost, completely lost. The bandits abandoned the offence itself, and began to argue idiotically about the nature of disease. I forgot the political implications of the KKK. I forgot Derveet's accusation (for it was no less) of mass-murder. I couldn't bear it.

"May I speak?"

The ogres all stared at me.

"He's the one with no family," murmured someone censoriously. I pointed out that he didn't have a family, as such, either.

"But I never had one. If I'd had one and I'd seen them die, I'd have done the decent thing."

"Hush, hush. Don't upset him."

(They generally had very gentle manners. It comes of everyone going about armed to the teeth.)

I could not tackle the question of altitude, it would just sound like more magic. But I could try to make one simple point.

"Listen. Durjana says that the drugs—"

"He knows nothing about those drugs!"

"Of course not. I never said he did. But it is nonsense to say that the Koperasi drugs would 'cure anything' and that the aneh died because of their 'bad magic.' Diseases have nothing to do with magic. Our own culture tells us that."

They all frowned at me dubiously.

"You see diseases come from—well, all diseases are really like the worms you get in your guts. They are—" I stumbled, turned to Derveet.

"Parasites," she murmured.

"Yes. Parasites. Very small parasites, too small to be seen. They come from—from: how should I say 'dari diluar dunia,' from outside the world?"

"From outer space," she supplied with a smile.

"Yes, from outer space."

The bandits nodded. Our people have some unexpected scraps of knowledge, on a folklore level.

"They are very clever, like all parasites. Now all drugs, our own and the Koperasi kind, are the same. They help the body fight the worm-things. But they only help, it is the body itself that either wins or loses.

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If the body is not strong and healthy no drug will be any use in the end, it will only make things worse—"

"There! I told you. It was the aneh's fault!"

Durjana had been following my words intently, moving his lips with mine to aid concentration. Now he bounced in his seat.

"No—*no!* The drugs were no good to them. What they needed was food, clean water. They were not strong enough—"

"Exactly!" cried the bandit, slapping the tabletop in delight. "Itu sudah'—that's exactly what I already said!"

"Oh yes."

"It's true."

"It was the aneh's own fault they died."

"This educated person says so."

Further down the table Derveet had put her arms on the tabletop and her face on her arms. I stared at her through the bandits' mindless crowing. I was afraid she had broken down, so much weight seemed to be resting on her thin bowed shoulders. But of course she was only laughing.

I could not sleep. Derveet's quarrel with the foolish ogres nagged at me like a toothache. In the dark I left my rustling shack and went out to sit on the end of the verandah, in my sleeping sarong and a shawl. It was cold. The center of the sky was dark blue and starry, but all the lower reaches of the dome had faded, and the east was showing a few lines of muddy orange. A screen creaked and a door opened in the wall of the boy brothel; a big crop-headed Koperasi stood looking out. He stayed for a moment, touching himself absently, presumably not aware of me in the shadow above. I watched. In my mind's eye I pictured that rod of flesh entering me. Power attracts.

Before it was fully light, the inn family appeared, the women, boys, and children. A little man, about three years old, wandered about playing with sticks and stones while the others worked. Every few minutes a wail arose, and one of the women lifted him absently to a tit. His grief didn't concern them, it was something to be turned off like a dripping tap. No one ever treats a little girl like that. To a tiny infant they say: Why are you crying? You must explain. You must learn to understand. If it isn't a good reason you had better stop, you have work to do. Then they complain that we are *irresponsible.* The girls, including one midget who could barely stagger, were taking it in turns to jump on the pedal of the heavy rice pestle: laughing, silent, breathless with effort. The grown women talked a little with their eyes. Probably they had some-

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thing to say about "the one with no family" because occasionally they glanced in my direction—without bothering to conceal it.

Tradition! When I was fourteen I should have died. My neighbors would have considered castration a barbarity. Once you've been chosen to be a man no one can take away that sacred "privilege." But they would have given me a beautiful sharp knife and stood over me, very kindly, while I did my duty. Suicide is the decent way, for a gentleman who outlives his use. I had escaped, but I could never leave the shame behind.

Buffalo was right. It was not a compliment, when my adopted family let me come up here alone. They were "sophisticated Timurese" but they would not have been so casual with their own beloved son and consort. The male is a necessary luxury, cosseted and disregarded. An unneeded male is—nothing. If I wanted worthless "letters of introduction" I might as well have them. Why not? It would keep me quiet.

This country must change, I thought. This country must change.

The man-child wailed and was lifted to suck. Annet, the aneh delegate, had said of the great debate, *"typical Dapur government. Stick something in their mouths and shut them up, give them whatever poisonous thing they're crying for."* That made me smile, grimly. Good. Let them give Timur what Timur cried for, without thinking too much about the consequences for themselves.

Derveet came up the road and turned into the yard, picking her way between puddles and cabbage stalks. Perhaps she had been with Annet. Halfway across she stopped and looked back over the dizzying panorama making its brief early morning appearance. Rivers of pale cloud streamed away down the dark folds of the hills: plains of Timur imaginary in the distance, underfoot the sordid thatch roofs of Canditinggi. She spoke. She was reciting quietly, for herself, a pantun: the Jagdanan quatrain. The subject was a lady traveling. The chill of the wayside inn at dawn is strange to her, strange and cold as her own decision to leave her family. . . . The inn mothers raised their eyes, compressed their lips and nodded. They showed Derveet respect, but a dismissive kind of respect—*failed woman.* One of them spoke aloud, roughly, in the dialect. I think she said: "Fine weather, madam."

"Ya, fine weather."

She came up to the verandah and leaned beside me. Our eyes met in rueful understanding, two outcasts together. Taking a silver case from her sash she offered me a cigarette. I declined, knowing what one of those green skinned demons would do to me first thing in the morning.

"Well, Endang of Timur, how is your observing?"

"They won't let me in," I said. "I came here as an accredited representative of my family, but they refuse to let me in to the debates."

Derveet stared at me. "Oh, is that what you meant? I thought you

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meant you were observing—well, men's business." She seemed about to laugh, at her own mistake or mine.

"You are amused?"

"I beg your pardon. But it would do you no good. You must have heard Annet: she is not enjoying herself. We have no Dapur skills on the mountain. Surely you realize—they don't *talk*."

For a moment I didn't understand her. "Oh that's ridiculous!" I exclaimed when I realized. "You can't express complex ideas in eye-talk. It's just a household pidgin, with a clairvoyant element that's been grossly exaggerated. Lots of women are giving it up altogether."

"Ah," said Derveet, studying the end of her cigarette. "Is that what they are saying in Timur now?"

I was embarrassed, not wanting to contradict her. But we had other things to discuss this morning, and we both knew it.

"You are very anxious" I began at last, "to discredit the KKK. Why is that?"

"Because I don't want Gusti Ketut Siamang to be prince of Timur."

Her directness made me flinch, and the look that went with the words was even more direct. Of course she thought I was a spy: eavesdropping on her, probably reporting to someone. KKK: Kipas, Kertas, Kain. It was an open secret in Timur that the Fan, the Paper and the Cloth concealed the operations of the Siamang family. And Derveet knew I was a supporter of Gusti Ketut.

"I am at this inn by accident," I said. "I have done you no harm."

She smiled. "My dear, I know. Hasn't Buffalo always been with you?"

It was stupid of me to be hurt by that.

I faced her firmly. "Very well. The Siamangs are 'in the pay of the Koperasi.' That's what you are telling the bandits in a roundabout way, and of course it is true. If you were realistic you would see that they know perfectly well already. The trouble is, you don't understand the nature of politics."

She inclined her head gravely.

"Have you ever been to the east coast? Have you ever seen the great Domes, out at sea?"

"Yes, I have seen them."

"That's where our real Rulers are. Can you imagine what life is like out there, how different from our squalor? Don't you see? We must deal with the Koperasi, our own brutal renegades, in order to reach the Rulers beyond. It is our only hope. For two thousand years, we've been sinking into the dirt. What has the traditional Peninsula to offer, compared with what the Rulers have?"

"Not much, I'm afraid. Not yet. But we are on a different road, and a hard one. The question is, will they let us live to travel it any farther."

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I had heard the expression "different road" before, and it only irritated me. It referred to something fantastical and absurd, like the political debate in eye-signs.

"Your story is incredible," I told her. "A gangster unloads suspect antibiotic on your aneh. Out of this you make a conspiracy involving the Siamangs, the Koperasi and our Rulers themselves. You can't possibly prove that the Koperasi have some monstrous secret order to exterminate our cripples—"

I had exaggerated wildly to show her how stupid it was. I read in her eyes that she meant exactly what I had said. I felt almost afraid to be talking to her.

"No, of course I can't prove that," she agreed coolly. "But if I keep talking about this one little transaction I *can* prove, perhaps I'll make some of them think."

"You are trying to disrupt the debate."

She nodded, as if I was a child who had suddenly seen the point of a very simple lesson.

"It's quite irresponsible—"

"Endang, it only starts with the aneh. Because we are the weakest, I suppose."

She sighed. "The power you Timurese admire so much, is the power of having no natural enemies. It is nothing to be proud of. Our Rulers come from another world, another time. Whatever they were once they are alien now: parasites. Some parasites are quite sensible. Others, you know, consume the host. Without seeming to care that they are also destroying themselves."

"I am sorry," I said stiffly, after an awkward silence, "that I muddied your argument last night. It was not intentional."

Derveet laughed.

"Don't worry, Timurese. I know what my chances are. If I can get them to support the election of this puppet-family unwillingly it will be a great leap forward, with which I ought to be satisfied. So I am told."

The sun was fully up now, enriching the thin air. The women moved more vigorously: the inn's big spotted cat rolled in a patch of warm light.

"Who do *you* think should be prince of Timur?"

"Ida Bagus Sadia," she answered promptly.

"Why is that?"

"Because I like him."

Her arrogance was astounding. I got up to leave her, muttering politely. "Excuse me, madam."

"Endang," she remarked gently, as I turned away. "Since you are so well educated, why was I helping you with your High Inggris last night? Quite simple words, I thought."

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I was surprised. The Rulers' language is functional, for official things, but it is not natural to us. Low Inggris is the first, the mother tongue. I told her so—"Our language is our own. Theirs can only be artificial. It is wrong to learn too much of it: it doesn't suit the Peninsulan mind—"

"You're right of course," said Derveet. "But who told you that?"

Even if her version of the drugs story was true, it made no difference. If the Rulers really were secretly culling our deformed like that, all the more need to reach them, to make ourselves count. Timur must have the Siamangs. We must be the first state to have a true government of *cooperation,* whether people liked the sound of the word or not. It was bound to lead to great improvements. I told myself I admired Derveet's stance, but she was hopelessly out of date. I was angry with myself for arguing with her. I went out and bathed. My Koperasi of the grey dawn came in to have a piss, dressed now in that heavy slab of uniform. He eyed my body thoughtfully across the stained tiles of the bathroom. I smiled. We left separately, it was safer that way.

I thought I had given Buffalo the slip, but perhaps not. At night in the commonroom he came and sat next to me, put his arm around my shoulders and hugged me, with a comically sad and gentle face.

The ninth month passed, the tenth began and the debate continued. Monsoon downpours invaded the regular cloud rain, nothing was ever quite dry indoors or out. The box-like sedan chairs were for ladies, and only the Koperasi had HC transport. My shoes were ruined. The wash boy at the inn claimed he "couldn't understand" trousers and returned my clothes crumpled and mysteriously sticky. I refused to be forced into native dress. Each day I made my round of the delegations, the states of Timur and the regions of Jagdana. Naturally only a conservative element had come to Canditinggi. Even my own state was represented by families I had scarcely heard of; secluded, reactionary inlanders. I spoke to countless wizened boys in picturesque livery. I got nothing from them but that infuriating smile of tradition—*for all your education, the truth evades you.*

Buffalo boy remained my bodyguard, there was nothing I could do about that. Childlike, he had become involved in my quest and didn't seem to notice a certain conflict of interest. He pointed out that we were missing an opportunity. For if we went to Gamartha, and said that Jagdana did not want a Timurese observer . . . I said we would not try that. It would be useless. Gamartha people were too old-fashioned.

Buffalo boy lowered his eyes. He said mildly, "You are not Timurese, originally . . . ?"

"No. I am adopted."

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I don't think he understood the term but he understood. He never pressed me again about the delegations I chose to avoid. I had meant to move out of the inn, but there was nowhere to go. So I went on watching Derveet patiently chipping away at the bandits. It was embarrassing now to think how I had sympathized with the aneh in their poor little quarrel. If Derveet could break the hold of the KKK, and therefore the Siamangs, over the criminal gangs: the Dapur would know it instantly in this fevered town. It might disturb the whole balance of the debate. Gusti Ketut's election rested on the fact that the women must know whom they were supposed to choose. But a whole princedom full of disaffected criminals might seem even worse than Koperasi displeasure.

However I soon realized there was no danger. Man-like, the bandits enjoyed the attention they were getting, but it was clear they would stick with the KKK. They were just playing, toying with the idea of making a noble stand. As this became more and more obvious I began to get annoyed with Derveet, illogically. If she really believed the choice between Siamang and Sadia was a choice between death and life, couldn't she be a bit more forceful? If she really believed we were facing genocide, surely it was not a case for gentle persuasion. I began to have a dream about Derveet watching a tree growing, while in the darkness around her the world was falling apart. I had given up remembering dreams, and all the interpretation business, quite deliberately and successfully—when I left my first home. But I couldn't get this one out of my head. Derveet's patience was agonizing, for the most detached observer.

She was as friendly as ever, in fact we talked a good deal. It was puzzling and depressing to find someone who, like me, had no reason to respect tradition, supporting it so obstinately. She would like to see a world without boys, she would like to see women and men living together as equals—sometime. But her faith in the Dapur was unshakeable.

Silent, secret, slow: the debate went on. I walked about the streets looking at closed gateways, and wondered if it was true that only eyes were moving in there, never mouths. Derveet had made me uneasy. I wondered if the Timur delegates could be trusted to represent Timur's real wishes, in this insidious Dapur atmosphere. Derveet told me that I only seemed to be shut out. In some mystical way my opinion was being counted. The debate's only purpose was to reflect accurately the decision of the people. If that was true then Gusti Ketut was safe. But I felt oppressed. The air of this town didn't suit me, it was making me ill.

The long wait was hard for Derveet and Annet as well. Their relationship was deteriorating. Annet did not come so often to the inn, and when she did it was only to jeer at Derveet's efforts with the bandits. When conversation failed she sat staring at her friend with angry eyes. An election like this is always "unanimous." Whatever kind of pressure

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the Dapur used to achieve this, it was telling on her now. We were on opposite sides, but I sympathized. If only it could be over—

A bandit called me a Koperasi-whore and Tjakil, my former suitor, knifed him. The question was only whose whore I ought to be. Why should I be expected to care? On the same day I was alone in a waiting room with a chair-boy, a Jagdanan about fifteen years old. He lifted hs sarong to show me he had been excised: given a false womanhood. Boys do this to each other at puberty-age, they are proud of it. His eyes looked nowhere—expecting nothing, desiring nothing but further violation. . . . I went back and shut myself in my windowless shack. I tried to picture the shining Domes, the pure life of our Rulers, but nothing would come. I kept thinking, unwillingly, of the dying aneh instead.

This was the first quarter of the tenth month. The Koperasi patrols were uneasy too. They stood in knots on street corners, fingering their weapons. We took care, if we had to pass them, not to brush against their space. Back at the inn Snake had fallen ill. He lay on the verandah wrapped in shawls, shivering and weak. "Why are you so sad?" whispered Derveet, holding his hand. He reached up and touched her cheeks, making lines for tears. "Yes, it's true we are all sad. Poor Snake, I wish I could keep it from you. It's too much for you."

In the streets people were saying that *the debate was nearly over, and it was ending badly.* I tried to pretend I didn't know what they meant, but it was hard to resist the feeling that something was coming out of those closed courtyards: invisible, intangible, giving the town bad dreams. Who is to be the one then? I wondered. But I was afraid I knew.

On the tenth of the month I got up and everything was quiet. The kitchen house was shut. No sign of the family, no sign of any guests. A town with empty streets is an ominous sight, but there were a few people about besides the Koperasi so I dared to go into the center. I walked into a little garden, a place where I often used to sit after trailing around the waiting rooms: a refuge. There was a round tank carved with monsters of some kind. I sat on the rim under a frangipani tree, its white and gold tinged petals at my feet. I looked into the pool, but the water seemed to be black. It was not reflecting anything. I wrapped my arms around myself and sobbed.

Why was I crying? I didn't know. The grief flowed through me like a current, but it seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside. Gradually I realized someone was actually asking me the question. There was a woman, sitting on the stone bench by the pool. She was dressed in blue, deep dark blue; every line of her long binding sash, every floating fold of her robes was composed and perfect. In one bare hand she held the silver links of the *rahula,* the ankle chain.

"Why are you crying, child?" she asked again.

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"There is so much injustice in the world—"

The spasm passed. Slowly, the tree and the sky returned to the water. I lifted my head.

"Have you been here all along?" I asked hoarsely.

It seemed entirely possible, at that moment, that she had been invisible when I walked in.

"No. I saw you from my window, so I came down." She smiled, her middle-aged face rippling smoothly. "I am from Jagdana, where we value beauty."

They had defeated me. I could not resist any longer. I knew what had happened, this morning in Canditinggi. The balance had finally fallen and there was a new prince for Timur. It had been a hard debate: the tension of the delegates' minds, locked together, had reached us all, affecting each according to capacity. Now they had decided, in grief, and that grief swept through our hearts. It was ours. This was the power of the Dapur. This was the different road. I thought of my adopted family. Did they intend me to have this experience? Perhaps they didn't even know what would happen to anyone near a great debate. We had given up a great deal, in coastal Timur, for the sake of staying alive.

"You have chosen."

"Reluctantly, yes," said the lady. "It was delicate. A choice of harms: a little could have changed it. But I believe, as you perhaps do not, that the peoples' minds are with me when I debate, just as our troubled minds have been with Canditinggi these past days. So be it then. It is generally better not to fight against fate."

Silk whispered as she rose, and with a slight bow she left me. She was gone before I realized I ought to thank her. In one small space of time I had been given everything I asked from Canditinggi. Recognition by a Dapur lady, inside knowledge of the debate—and the prince I had wanted for Timur. But it was too late now.

Derveet invited me to walk with her up to Candi Daulat. It was a rare afternoon without rain. We climbed through the glistening trees and vines, on the remains of the old road: steep geometric curves from another time. The sky above the hilltop was soft and broken, water vapor rose from the ground in thin white veils. We sat on slabs of fallen sculpture by the squat black shrine and looked down on Canditinggi.

"It's strange," I said, "but I have never wanted to be a woman."

"Why should you?"

"I think that's obvious."

"Women are not better than men. Only different."

I answered that as it deserved—not at all, and she grinned lazily.

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"You can't deny it was Woman to whom God turned for help, at the renewal of the world."

I leaned back and craned upwards to where this transaction was still presented in stone: the Mother of Life dancing on the newborn mountaintops, receiving Divinity.

"There is no man in that picture," I pointed out.

"True. But it is man then who comes to God face to face, a difficult thing for any woman to do. Dealing with the Divine as a business partner tends to get in the way."

"Of what?"

"Of being human. Of humility."

Two days had passed, and we had all begun to recover from that strange and frightening wave of depression. No one spoke of it. No announcement had been made: the Dapur does everything slowly. But Derveet and I knew it was all over. Silently, our gentle abstract conversation acknowledged her defeat.

Candi Daulat means temple of the sovereigns; these fallen stones were carved all over with the eagle insignia of the vanished Garudas. It was not strictly safe to be here. The shrine had few visitors, even up in the defiant mountains.

"Shall we go back?"

Derveet stood. She touched the stone ruefully, half ashamed of her own sentiment. I saw suddenly how young she was, only a little older than myself. And how very much alone. She glanced at me sharply: I quickly looked away.

There was someone coming up the road. It was Annet, the aneh woman, in her black dusty robes. No greeting.

"They told me I'd find you here," she said, ignoring me. "Well, I've voted. It will be announced tomorrow. Jagdana discovered Ida Bagus Sadia has piles. Gamartha counted up, and decided the Bangau only have sixty-three generations, not a hundred and twenty after all. Then Timur reluctantly yielded to social pressure, so we are now unanimous. You'd better give me some of that foul paper money. I have to pay up at the hotel, and I've nothing left."

They went. I stayed. So Gusti Ketut Siamang was now prince of Timur. How surprised Annet would have been, if she had looked back, to see the Timurese, the collaborator, on his knees and crying for the poor Peninsula.

I was also crying for myself. Canditinggi and Derveet had taken away from me my dream of the shining Rulers, and I would never get it back. I had to see the work camps now, and the "state plantations," and all the casual daily brutality. I had to see the contempt of that "education" which simply snipped out the words I must not know—parasites, aliens.

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And there was no dream to replace the lost dream: only the Peninsula, with all its ugly faults intact. The Dapurs had proved to me that the "different road" was real, but what was the use of it. What was the use of mind speaking to mind if the only message was defeat, defeat, defeat . . . ? I swallowed tears, and sat up suddenly. I thought: he is not elected yet. Not until the announcement.

I don't know when I had guessed Derveet's secret. Presumably after she changed my mind because it would hardly have mattered to me before. There was something uncanny about that dark outcast lady. Her authority over the bandits—and her astounding arrogance on the matter of this election. Once Durjana in a heated moment shouted at her, "Only your name!" and sat down instantly, blushing like a rose. The name that kept the knives sheathed could not be "aneh." She might have been born a Jagdanan noble or even a minor royal. But Timurese, criminal or not, do not curtsy to Jagdana. Only one family ever united the Peninsula. Only one name makes us all bow.

I had heard the story that somewhere in the wilds a Garuda survived: a crippled Garuda, cast out in the darkness. I had imagined, like the rest of my world, that this was a sort of allegory of dissent.

I stayed on the hilltop for some time, thinking. It seemed to me absolutely clear that I must be the one to tell the secret. The aneh knew Derveet's family name, and so did the bandits. Probably some part of the Jagdana delegation knew her too. But the aneh were powerless, the bandits corrupt, and Jagdana notoriously too "restrained" to take direct action over anything. I could give Derveet another vote—powerful and not at all restrained. The people who gave me birth had an old, old, quarrel with Garuda of the South. Obviously they had not been trusted. I could see why not, between Koperasi spies and our own, home-grown traditions of treachery. But I must take the risk. It was considerable (this was what kept me on the hilltop); but for me, I believed, not for Derveet. In Gamartha, feudal obligations stand before love or hate. In Gamartha, a needless male is an animal to be slaughtered.

I went down into town, under cover of a new rainstorm and the growing darkness. I went down the street I had never dared to visit. I knew they couldn't do anything to me in Canditinggi. I had still been frightened, and wished I was staying in a brighter, more populous area. Various guards challenged me and allowed me to pass. Names are magic. Eventually I spoke to an assistant of one of the delegates, a lady who had once been a distant cousin of mine. I told her what I knew or surmised, and suggested Gamartha ought to respect the preference of the sovereign family. There was a pause. Then in silence a hand I did not see pushed from under the lady's curtains a knife in a case decorated with the device

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of my family; defaced, because we are all dead. I left it there. I left. No one touched me. I went back to the inn and slept like a baby.

The next morning it transpired that there would be a delay: a final consultation. I sat in a coffee shop, shaken and yet quite calm, while round me boys and men whispered nervously. My Koperasi saw me through the door and came in. He pretended to check the required notices above my head and quietly told me to get out of my inn as there was a big police action coming off. Big game. Get your bag. Get out. Don't look back.

I went into the street, walking like a puppet. Everything seemed deathly still, even the sun in the sky. It occurred to me that Durjana the bandit was worth more trust than I. I went—to Annet, not knowing what else to do, to the medium class hotel the Jagdanans had put her in, in their street. The courtyard gates were open. Derveet was there. Annet was leaving. There was a chair on the ground, the chair-boys were taking out some meager bundles: Snake and Buffalo as busily stowing the bundles back in. "Extra pay! Extra pay!" "Lady walk. You carry luggage." "Lady no walk. Lady can't walk. Extra pay!"

As I arrived Annet was saying in her loud harsh voice "It's a farce. I won't stay." Derveet put out her hand and spoke, quietly. Annet turned, with a sour, exasperated, loving face; and they embraced. I realized I had never seen Derveet in town before.

"Madam—"

"Endang. Why—what's the matter?"

"The Koperasi know."

"Know what?"

"I am from the North, originally."

She nodded, with a puzzled smile. She had known. It wasn't important.

"I am an outcast, but last night I went to Gamartha street. I told someone I believed a living Garuda was present at the debate, and did not favor Gusti Ketut. I thought it might make a difference."

She stared, a frozen moment.

"But now the Koperasi mean to raid our inn, looking for big game. I—I must have been followed."

Not necessarily.

"It's odd," she said, "to tell tales and then come and explain about it. But thank you anyway—" Her voice was as gentle as ever. But her eyes were black, so I could see no iris. I would have liked to die.

Then there was a commotion in the street behind us. A line of chairs stopped. The ladies descended, veiled and bearing their silver chains, surrounded by high caste boys in green and mauve Gamarthan livery. The boys had a flower ball woven of frangipani petals, they were tossing it from hand to hand to sweeten the air. The robes and liveries drew

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level with us, across the street. As they did so, someone let the toy slip and it tumbled into the roadway. The Gamarthan ladies did not raise a single eye or a single veil but they all stooped together, as if reaching for it. Like a field of grain under the wind they went down, they bowed, fluidly, until their graceful bare hands touched the ground.

One of the boys ran out and picked up the flowers. The Gamartha delegation rose, walked on and turned into Jagdana's gate.

Garuda, silently acknowledged by her loyal enemies, stood on the dirty cobbles blinking like a cat surprised by sunlight. It was not twelve hours since I had spoken to my cousin. I understood that I, and my contacts, had probably been watched all the time. My mouth was suddenly dry: Gamartha never forgets. But Derveet turned back to me with a crooked smile.

"My apologies," she said, "Endang, and Gamartha. You must have been followed. Things are not so bad, after all. Never quite so bad as they might be."

That was the end. Annet took her friend's arm and drew her into the gateway. The chair-boys had stopped arguing. They stood together with Snake and Buffalo like a shield, and stared at me until I walked away. I did not see Derveet again. I left the inn that same afternoon, and then Canditinggi. It seemed better. The police action achieved nothing except to put the so-called fifth vote into disarray. A day or two later an unidentifiable delegation guard-boy was found dead, with the colors torn from his livery. "Been followed" was after all an euphemism, a Peninsulan courtesy. Our Rulers' servants are everywhere, even in the ranks of proud Gamartha. What happened in the closed courtyards I do not know. When the announcement eventually came Ida Bagus Sadia had been elected prince.

But Derveet was wrong. Things are bad. Things are so bad, nowadays, that it is hard to see how worse can be possible. Shortly before the Accession, the disappointed Bangau invited their former daughter for a visit, with her son the prince-elect. During this visit it seems the elder boys of the family entered Sadia's room in the middle of the night. They gagged him, tied him to a bedpost and castrated and excised him, cauterizing the wounds with a hot iron so they should not be guilty of murdering a guest. He was seventeen years old. He killed himself, naturally, as soon as he was able to hold a knife. In punishment for this crime the Bangau lost the last of their territory to the plantations. The displaced population was moved into camps, in the usual way. The Bangau themselves have vanished, like the Garudas and so many others; and Gusti Ketut Siamang is our prince. There is no sign as yet of any improvement in Timur's status. I believe the Peninsula is doomed. I

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believe we have all gone mad, and nothing can save us. I dream no more of the "different road," of the tree growing slowly, slowly. It is no use. The forest is on fire, and as far as I can see that precious new growth burns just like any other wood.

As for Derveet, she is gone. I think the fate of Ida Bagus Sadia, the good young man, broke her at last, destroyed her patience and her strength. I heard a few months after the tragedy that Buffalo boy was dead, killed in a Koperasi raid on illegal hill-crop farming. Derveet may have been killed there too. Or she may still live, an ogre with the rest. There is a story of a new bandit leader: very clever, very savage, who is terrorizing the Koperasi. I don't know. Perhaps it hardly matters. But when I hear of that leader dead, as I will one day soon, I will mourn the last of the Garudas, the end of our hope. ●

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LAURA GUTH
CIRCULATION DIRECTOR, SUBSCRIPTIONS

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DREAM OPERATOR

She's already deep under your skin
ghostly at the switchboard
coarse and pervasive as prickly heat

She's the woman who compels you
a million times though none you can recall
yet you know her buzz-saw kisses
this desperation angel with a corn-silk voice
with the tongue that darts like an adder
her hair spun from free electrons
clouding white about her pouty face
whose hunger hums like a dial tone

She's walking the Amazon of your subconscious
where dreams coil on neural phone lines
where they claw like charred finger bones
where they glide from leafy skyscrapers
to your water's dull edge
with the blurred spectra of a jaguar

She's wearing her nebulous headset
and channeling each dream to your nerve-tree
fingering the switches with her nails

She's pressed your mind against her breast
opening the circuits to all calls

And she's all too aware of you
for each time you leave and undream her
there's a soulful price to pay
as she collects the toll

She's suckling you against
her teeth like a ball of hard candy
and eventually you lose shape
and she cares only that you're pure
and oh so electric sweet
to the taste

—Robert Frazier

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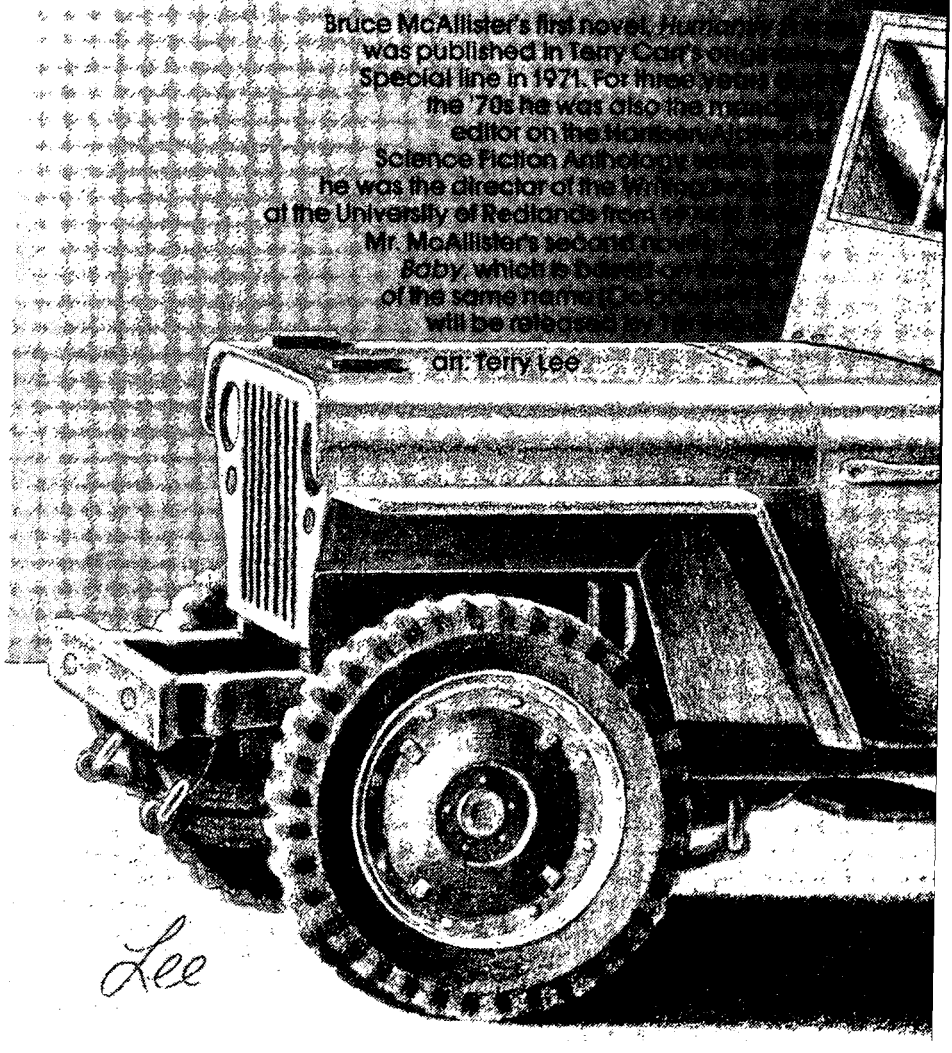
SONGS FROM A FAR COUNTRY

by Bruce McAllister

Bruce McAllister's first novel, *Humanity*, was published in Terry Carr's Ace Special line in 1971. For three years in the '70s he was also the managing editor of the Montserrat Science Fiction Anthology series; he was the director of the Writing Program at the University of Redlands from [illegible]. Mr. McAllister's second novel, *Baby*, which is based on the short story of the same name, [illegible] will be released by [illegible]



art: Terry Lee

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He who enters the dance must dance.

—Brazilian Proverb

The man they called The Way entered the hotel room in San Juan del Negro as the fighting began in the streets below. He stood for a moment in the doorway, bull-like, his archaic left-arm prosthesis purring as his hand fell to his side and his head cocked. Anyone watching would have seen a man listening for something—something beyond the staccato of assault rifles, the hissing of jeep-mounted lasers and the occasional concussions of rockets. Had anyone been watching, he would have killed them. Without a weapon it would have taken him a second or two and later he would remember only vaguely having done it.

The alloy stud he wore in his left ear glinted in the fluorescent light of the little room. The ornamental scars on his right cheek, which carried the same message, glistened with the sweat of the rainy season. The tattoo on his good hand was the oddity. It was the dog face of a dragon, the rest of it hidden under his sleeve.

He listened, feeling nothing. There was no blue. There was no sensation of leaving his body.

He began toward the one lamp in the room.

In the window a face loomed large as a building, its mouth moving slowly, the words drowned out by the sounds of the fighting outside. The bull-like man ignored it. He had seen it on the big screen in the *zócalo* and hadn't bothered to look at it even then. He knew that face; he knew it better than any of them did, and he knew its appearance would mean another riot. Students would die. Stores would be trashed.

In the end, none of this mattered.

The lamp revealed nothing. Base, bulb, wiring, shade—nothing. He tore the lamp to pieces slowly with the prosthesis and barely registered the impact of two antipersonnel rockets on the building. There was still no blue. He did not have to shut his eyes to know this. The rockets, like the rest, meant nothing.

He popped the panels from the ceiling lights with his good hand and found the key taped to the second bulb's mounting. Removing it carefully with finger and thumb of the prosthesis, he placed it in a small bottle of clear fluid, dipped both fingers in the fluid, and returned the bottle to his pocket. They would not, he knew, have poisoned the doorknob.

When he left the room, nothing turned blue.

There is a dream—or memory—one without feeling. In it an older man, old enough to be his father, though he is not, appears before him dressed in civilian clothes. The viewer is a boy, ten or eleven. The man has his hand on the boy's shoulder, telling him something, just as he has before.

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The boy knows he must get back to his studies soon, his training with the others, that he will not see his own father for a month or more. But that is all right. He is less and less happy in his father's house these days. His father is a coward. The man who should be wearing a major's oak leaf cluster has helped him understand this. This is what the man is telling him even now, as he stands with him in this dream or memory. "I know it's painful," he is saying. "But that's better than not knowing, am I right?" The boy nods. He nods again.

They had lived with their little war a long time, these people, and were smart enough to stay in their rooms. Near the elevators, the empty hallway flickered blue and he took the stairs instead. The stairs were a flaking yellow, and they remained yellow as he descended them.

Outside, the street was empty. When he rounded the corner, there was their little war again.

For a second, a meaningless second, he thought of the carnival in Ixtla, of the woman who had stayed in his room for three days, obedient, inexhaustible, as he waited for the confirmation to come. She'd had the eyes of a *meta* user, had seen his stud and scars, and had assumed he could help her. When he was finished, he had left her on the floor, writhing in what they called "mother's hunger."

He had met her in the *zócalo* at *carnaval*. Every village had its *zócalo*, every *zócalo* its *carnaval*.

They were staging their *carnaval*—their little war—in the *zócalo* in front of the hotel even now. The Indian women, who spoke Nahuatl when they spoke at all and tried to sell their weavings on the pavement, had fled long ago. The video arcade, full of students when he had first arrived, was the first the soldiers had trashed. Under the purple blossoms of the jacarandas the students were throwing bricks and pipes at the soldiers and firing what they had to fire—ancient carbines, a few black market FN FALs with NATO ammunition, homemade pneumatic dartguns with sodium cyanide. In turn, the soldiers were trying to kill them with brand-new Israeli Tamirins, jeep-mounted pulse-lasers and disposable light rockets. These toys were a little too much for the soldiers, but they were learning, and as they did, the students were dying.

Looming above the little war, above the little square, was the face on the great screen, the epicanthic folds of the eyes, the odd bronze color of the skin and hair, the features Amerasian, not Mayan. The mouth moved slowly to the words of a silent song. The eyes were upcast like a saint's. The face towered. It would not go away, though the soldiers wanted it to go away.

Were he able to feel anything for that face, it would be a bitterness, distant—someone else's life—but he felt nothing. It was a contract, noth-

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ing more. The money was good; it would get him off the market for seven years, maybe eight, back to Kalki or San Andres, and a new arm if he chose to spend it that way. He would find the man with the face, and do the job. That was all.

The soldiers were firing at the screen now with light weapons—hysterical gestures, nothing more. They would move to heavier things soon. Somewhere in the city students and unionists had taken a television station, holding it long enough to get a video of their leader on the air, on the big mosaic-laminate screen in this and every other *zócalo* in the city. Somehow they held it. Somehow the screen did not shatter. Each round simply took a little piece from it, the face deteriorating slowly. Something about it made him smile.

He had no choice. The riot stretched up three streets into residential areas, toward the train station on the other side.

He slitted his eyes, breathed in slowly, deeply, breathed again. A word that was more like the sound an animal might make passed between his lips, through his nose, deeper than his lungs, and suddenly he was moving across the *zócalo*, between the tracers and pulse-lasers and screams.

He listened, and felt nothing.

It is a picture without feeling, but one with sound. He is a few years older. He is in his father's house. "I don't understand," his father is saying. "What has that bastard done to you?" The boy answers: "He hasn't done a thing. He's just told me the truth—why you quit, what you are." "And what am I? What does he say I am?" His father asks this from the couch, drunk again. "A coward," the boy answers. His father hits him. Time stops. His father's face contorts in pain, in shame. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he says. He is crying. "You don't understand that kind of war. There were kinds of immorality you can't imagine. Larkin knows this. He was there. . . ." But the boy is gone, back to the base, to the compound where he has spent his life with the other children, back to the man who is old enough to be his father but is not. Later, when he understands what that man did to him, he will remember this picture as the last: his father on the couch, crying.

He fell in behind three students as they ran across the *zócalo*. He ran with them, saw no blue, felt nothing at all as the girl to his right was cut in half, arms, chest, head pinwheeling like a doll's. He caught a flash of her face as it moved past him, the finer European features so typical of the universities and middle class, and then her head, breasts and arms were past and there was blood somehow on his shirt and hands. He swore, but without fear. The laser that had found the girl had been meant for her, not him, and so there had been no blue. This was how it always was.

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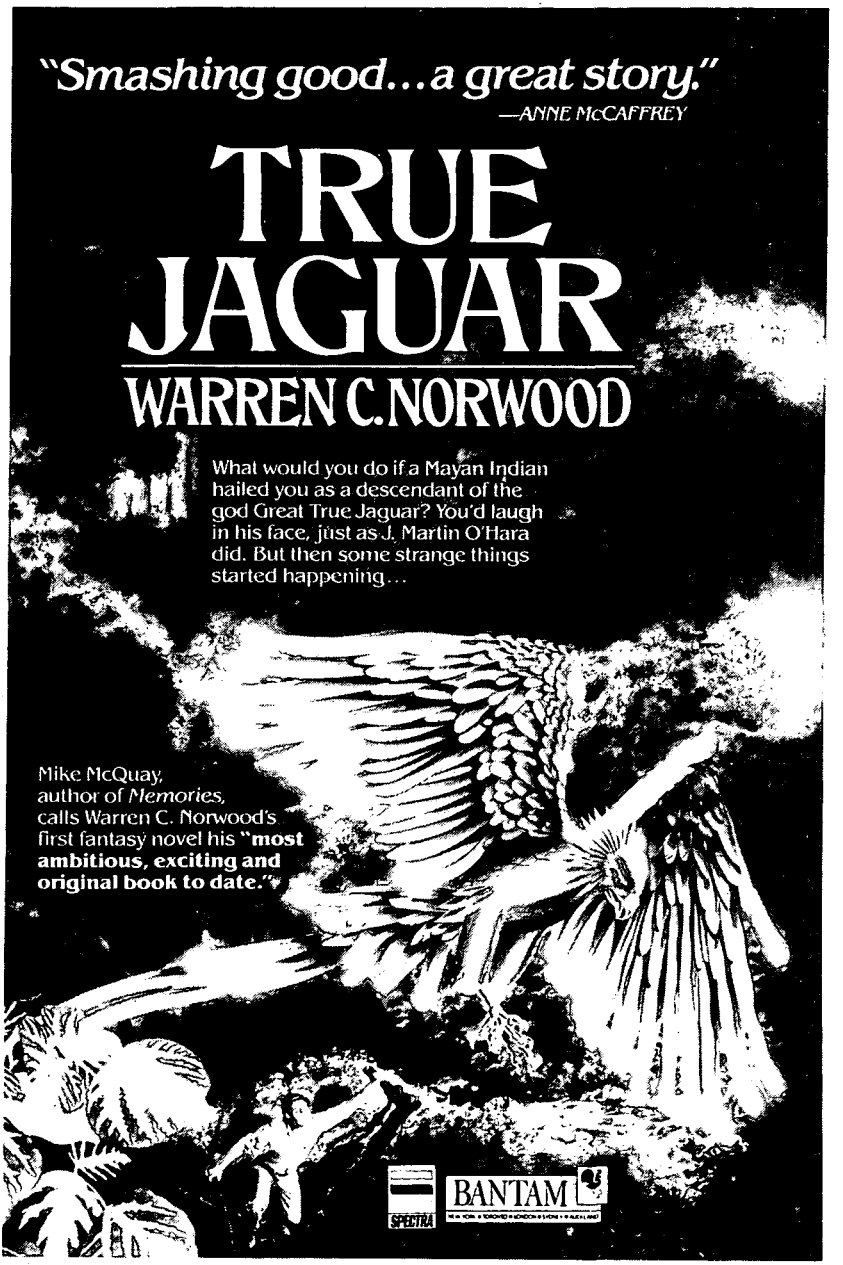
"Smashing good...a great story."
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TRUE JAGUAR
WARREN C. NORWOOD
What would you do if a Mayan Indian hailed you as a descendant of the god Great True Jaguar? You'd laugh in his face, just as J. Martin O'Hara did. But then some strange things started happening...
Mike McQuay, author of *Memories*, calls Warren C. Norwood's first fantasy novel his **"most ambitious, exciting and original book to date."**
SPECTRA
BANTAM

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When it did come, it took him completely. He felt a calm move through him like a drug. The *zócalo* flashed blue and held. A blue jeep skidded to a halt no more than ten meters away, rear wheel up on the curb, the blue shadows of the jacaranda leaves dappling the young gunner's blue face, the young driver's blue face.

To his left a student angled away, shoes pounding the pavement, and the gunner took the legs off the boy with a sputtering hiss. The remaining student—indigo blue, in front of him—pulled a pipe from somewhere and tossed it.

The pipe and the boy's head disappeared in a blue haze, under a sky as blue as any the bull-like man had ever seen.

He stopped, the adrenalin barely there. He looked at the gunner and the gunner looked back. The 70-kilo Du Pont chemical laser—tubes, ignition system and alloy shield—turned its barrel toward him at last. The jeep inched closer. The gunner grinned, nodded, playing with him. He knew, as the jeep began to burn bright as a blue sun, that it would be now.

He left his body.

In this picture—with its sounds and smells and tastes so intense that it must be someone else's life, not his—there is a familiar room on a military base somewhere. The seven children—five boys, two girls—are nearly grown and he, the viewer, no longer leads them. Long ago, the man who was a major, and is now a colonel, told him he would always lead, always be the best, his blue talent astonishing even among such talents. This man took him under his wing, like a father. This man made him their team leader.

The other boy had a small, wiry body, skin the color of brass, and Oriental eyes, and had been nothing then, nothing at all—clumsy, his talent vague, imprecise. There had, so the rumors went, even been doubts about whether he should be included. His father's talent—appearing like the others in Nam, in the long blood and death of it—had been vague too at first, the major said. The boy was likable. He worked hard. And then one day it wasn't vague, it wasn't imprecise. The major had been right.

In this picture the boy with the Amerasian face is their leader. Because the colonel wishes it. Because the others wish it, too. The feelings are rage, jealousy, and betrayal, but the viewer does not feel them.

Everything in the *zócalo* slowed. Time moved like syrup, rockets like slow blue fish, the rifle rounds like smaller fish, and even the flash of lasers no faster than quick eels. The jeeps, the armored personnel carriers and the legs of those running barely moved at all. He floated free, curious.

When he came to rest at last, it was no more than a meter above the

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gunner—above the close-shaven head, the narrow shoulders, the body foreshortened by the angle of the view.

Turning, he saw his own body where he had left it, legs apart, perfectly still, the eyes no longer on the gunner but on *him*, where he floated. The gray eyes, blue now, looked back at him, waiting, and even in the growing blue haze he could see the ornamental scars, the dragon's head on the back of his good hand, the thick body that was his, though piece by piece it was becoming someone else's. He could see a bitterness in the eyes, though he could not feel it.

He looked down at the young gunner's hands, so close now, and saw the trigger finger begin to move.

He looked back at himself, met his own eyes, and saw that they understood.

With an agonizing slowness his body stepped to the right, toward the jeep, as the laser moaned and the eel-like cloud of its blue light passed a few inches to the left of his head.

He looked again at the gunner's hands and watched as a finger pressed the tracking button, as the can-like barrel began to swivel, as the finger began to pull the trigger again—all of this so slowly that it might not be happening at all.

He met his own eyes once more and his body stepped to the right, took five slow steps and rose like a bird up, up, up into the air, into the jeep—the air a blue fog, the gunner's fingers and neck just as blue, as the laser missed his head again.

Then it was over. He was back in his body, the world all noise and speed, he half-falling, half-scrambling into the jeep before driver or gunner could free a sidearm. The gunner swung the barrel at him, trying to pin him against the shield, caught the prosthesis instead, a hundred kilos of manflesh with it, and the bull-like man had the barrel, was swinging it into the gunner's crotch, and the gunner—a boy—was screaming, the scream lost in the concussions of weapons everywhere.

He killed the boy with his elbow, separating the mandible at the ear and sending the shock to the brain. He killed the driver with the steering wheel, jamming the thin bone of the nose up into the first lobe of the cerebrum.

The blue was gone as he leaped from the jeep, hitting the ground at a run. Behind him, the soldiers were at last using rockets against the screen, against the face for which, he told himself, he felt nothing.

The picture is replaced by another, like a frame of film. A fair August day in North Carolina, a training camp, five years of briefings and deniable missions behind them, rumors of their existence contained, their successes, true or not, a legend. The man old enough to be his father is

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laughing on the patio, leans over, tells him a secret. Why not? After all, the viewer is a man now, a soldier like the others. What is past is past.

The viewer listens. He hears what his father really was: a man of conscience, sensitive and weak—not fit for service, but certainly no coward, unless you define the word that way. "I lied, sure," the colonel says again, the shit-eating grin, "because I wanted you, Waylon. You were good. I had to or it wasn't going to work. You can understand." The man grins again—a joke? a gesture of friendship, man to man? "I didn't have to do it with the others. You were different; you were a risk. Your father had very strong views, Waylon."

The feelings rise within him again and hands pull him from the man old enough to be his father, hold him back screaming in the summer air even as the blue fades and he knows he must get away from them all—from the man who is not his father, from the ghost that is, from the young man who should not be their team leader, but is, and from the others, who, he sees now, can never be his brothers and sisters in any way.

There is another picture. In it a bull-like man, one arm missing, is running. In it there is no feeling.

He approached the station of La Bala at a walk, lungs and heart stabilizing. Every wall carried the face—the epicanthic folds, green eyes, the skin. It was this way everywhere in the city, the posters defaced by soldiers minutes or hours after they were put up. Sometimes there would be blood, fresh or old—or even a body—under the face. They were quite willing to die for him, it seemed.

In the city they called him El Cantor. In the countryside, El Mago. Those in power, by his Spanglishized name: Danimarcos.

The soldiers were rarely able to get all of the face. It was a good glue his *obreros* used. Sometimes the Asian eyes were left, sometimes the long hair, or the mouth. Sometimes what they could not scrape away they spray-painted over. But even then, when only the white background of the poster was left, people knew what it was. The scraping, the spraying, meant nothing. They were stupid. They wanted this government to remain—old coalition of military, El Hampa and the *burguesía de la derecha*—but in the end their little country, like every other, meant nothing. Even what they were paying him meant only a little. They would keep it together a while longer, and then, like the others, it would come apart.

Years ago, when he had known that face, the bull-like man had called him something else, but that didn't matter either. The man on the posters had changed, gone feral, was causing trouble there and people wanted him killed. It would take someone special, they knew, and word had come back from the circuit that the bull-like man was indeed special—one of

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the five or six best in this hemisphere, this line of work. That was all they knew. They didn't know about North Carolina, the seven, or anything else. Their choice had been coincidence. As it should be. A contract, nothing more.

The people adored El Cantor and he adored them—or so the songs he sang said to them. Students, *campesinos*, *obreros*, academic elite, fallen Catholics and even some not so fallen—all worshipped him, and assumed they knew why. Even the bull-like man's employers assumed they knew.

The bull-like man knew.

El Cantor was a *helper*. His talent wasn't blue. It wasn't dreams that came true or auras before death or voices that could keep you alive. It was different—and better. None of them were *telekines*, but this was better. Temporal lobe to temporal lobe—the human *will* made real, just as it had been for his father. Telekinesis of neurotransmitters, synaptical patterns? Synchronicity of neural phenomena, one he somehow controlled? It didn't matter which. It worked and it worked well.

With it he could *help*, people feel what he wanted them to feel. He could *help* them follow him, love him, and as he did, bring a nation to its knees.

The man old enough to be his father had called it "theta-train persuasions."

A girl on a cot had called it *helping* and the word had stuck.

The man born Daniel Mark, son of Phillip Mark, had shown nothing at first. The major had brought him in only because his father, a Namvet from Project Delta, had been a *helper* too, and in the end, a good one. The others—all sons and daughters of documented Namvet espers, too—had shown talent from the very start. Three were *waking clairs*, one a *nocturnal precog*, one a *tactile remoter*, and two, combinations the testers couldn't understand. Larkin, as he'd admitted more than once, hated the thought of losing even one of them, and he'd let the boy in.

Two years and thirty-eight war games later the boy's talent began to show. He would sit on a path in the North Carolina woods—the "run to ground" game—and when the others passed on S&D, as alert as their talents could make them, they wouldn't see him. Had he been an aggressor, he'd have killed them as if they'd been mindless grunts, as if they'd had no talent whatsoever. He didn't seem to know it. He would sit waiting for them and when they were past he would stand up and say, "Bang, you're dead," and laugh and later say, "Jesus, how could you have missed me—Kelly nearly tripped over my leg!" He wouldn't spray them with the irritant they were supposed to use in a kill. "Why?" he would say. "This isn't a game," Larkin would answer, but the boy's smile would make them all smile, and in a while Larkin would laugh, the

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others too, and the boy would say, "Let's do it again tomorrow!" as if he didn't know what they were training for.

Danimarcos, El Cantor, El Mago—son of a Special Forces lieutenant out of Pleiku who found he could make people leave him alone in the triple-canopy jungle, make them blind to him and to their own deaths as he killed them; that he could make people who hated him come to him, like the Viet Cong woman, night after night in the monsoons; that he could even convince MACV bureaucrats, there in Saigon, that her child—and his—should come home with him, should come back to the States with him when he was through.

And so the major made him team leader.

Because the major liked him; because they all did.

Because he wanted them to.

Because he *helped* them to.

All except the boy whose world turned blue.

When Daniel Mark had tried it on the path that day, in the hot Carolina sun—tried to *help* him feel what the others felt—the world had turned blue. Just as if he had been in danger.

Every time the boy tried it, the world turned blue.

This was how the bull-like man knew.

The street ended, opening onto a promenade that circled the station. He could see a car parked at the bottom of the wide white steps. There were no crowds, no bands of students, no *campesinos* and their families, no lone tourists. The emptiness might have been a warning, but without the blue it meant nothing. His porcine lungs—grafted five years before in Zurich and better than his own—did not increase their rate. His heart, which was his own, did not change.

Four soldiers were leaning against a wall at the top of the steps. Seeing him, they straightened and began to watch him. He was the only one out in the afternoon sun and it gave him an importance he would have preferred to avoid. He had no choice.

As he passed the car, a little plastic Rebrotin, he heard the radio. The car was empty. The radio was playing one of the songs: "Una Muerte." He had heard it in every *pueblo* and *barrio* in Uruguay and Argentina six months ago, long before they had contacted him about the job, and he had wondered even then who the singer was. There had been no posters, no videos, then.

Theta-train persuasion wouldn't work through a video, a radio, a live broadcast of any kind, but that didn't matter. All it took was a concert or two, The Singer standing before two hundred thousand listeners, his talent greater now than any Larkin could have imagined. After that,

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after feeling what he had *helped* them to feel, the radios and televisions and video players would be enough to remind them. It was that simple.

At dawn the next day, at the stadium near Oblea, the biggest concert in The Singer's career would begin: three hundred thousand bodies, El Cantor himself, a vast PA system, the media from two or three dozen nations recording it all. Even the soldiers would not be able to stop it.

Only if The Singer were not there would it stop.

The bull-like man barely recognized the voice. It was coarse now, on the edge of tears, yet strong and resolved. Not a boy's voice. "*Esta es*," it sang, "*una canción de amor, mi amor.*" *This is a love song, my love.*

Una canción de amor no debe tener sangre
A love song should not have blood
Una canción de amor no debe tener lágrimas
A love song should not have tears
Or your death
In the streets
Where we played as children.

He walked on, the voice receding behind him.

Esta es una canción de amor, mi amor
This is a love song, my love.
A love song does not have friends
Torn from their families,
Returning only
As rumors of death.
Esta es una canción de amor, mi amor

This is a love song, my love.
It should have children
As happy as we were
On the earth of our villages,
Untainted by our blood,
And you walking beside me,
Not your casket
Like a bullet in my heart.

He glanced back once and saw blood by the other side of the car. There had been a body; someone had dragged it away. It was the kind of death they lived with day after day, until they felt nothing. He removed a small plastic folder of documents and as he approached the soldiers, nodded to them. Three were young and incompetent, the youngest nervous, nearly

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hysteric. The fourth, a seasoned NCO, was the one he could not allow his eyes to meet. He did not smile, but instead relaxed his face, loosened his body, keeping his eyes away from the man.

The steps did not turn blue.

When he was to them and the NCO's eyes told him what he needed to know, he looked down again. He thought of the ones he had killed in Tibesti and Bhutan and other places he had trouble remembering—some of them in the early days, all seven of them together, but mostly later, when he was alone. He knew these men were the same. Their uniforms, their ranks, were not enough. The power they wanted was different: To look into the eyes of others, to see fear turning there, and to kill without needing a reason. This was the power they had dreamed of, their fathers and grandfathers before them, for centuries, payment for a thing they knew had been taken from them but which they could not, if asked, have described.

The NCO with his broad, pock-marked face checked his papers, noting the stud and scars and tattoo and comparing them with the internal travel document. The NCO studied him, wanting him to look up, to show him what he wished to see, to give him a reason, through he needed none. The bull-like man did not.

The NCO made a gesture. He was free to go. The stud and scars and tattoo meant El Hampa, *meta*, *traficante*. The military had its interests, its bedfellows, in times like these. The NCO would have enjoyed killing him, of course—because the stud and scars meant an enforcer, one of the *galopos* he and the other young men of his village had envied in their youth—but that was another matter, for another time. There was a revolution, and El Hampa and the generals once again had to sleep together, yes?

Years ago, in Trinidad, the world had flashed blue as he put on the nylon body armor his employers had provided for his "safety." He was still young and had worn it for an hour before understanding what the blue meant. He nearly died, the slow-acting propylfluorophosphate dust hitting his system five days after he had torn the garment from his body, four days after he had made his kill, and a day after he had ended his employer's life in a way that satisfied him, listening as the man screamed and offered him anything he wanted. A week in a province hospital was all that had kept him alive.

He did not take chances now. A flash of blue in a firefight would keep him alive, but a key covered with arsenious oxide, a lamp smeared with cardiotoxin oil—how could he be sure in time what the blue meant? The fluid in the little bottle in his pocket had by now neutralized any of the more common delay poisons. That was what mattered.

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As he walked through the empty station, bootsteps followed but eventually grew fainter. With the key from the little bottle he unlocked the fifth locker on the nearest wall and removed the overnight bag his employers had left for him, carrying it with his prosthesis. The station flickered blue for an instant and he knew it was the contents of the bag, not the handle. The prosthesis absorbed nothing. Were it his own bag, were the airport checks not so tight, he would be free of this altogether. Were his employers not so insistent on deniability. Were his lead time greater. Any of these things would have made a difference.

In the stinking restroom with its graffiti and defaced posters of El Cantor, he jammed two coins in the outer door, filled the basin with water, and poured the contents of the little bottle into it. With his good hand he removed the Ingram machine pistol from the bag and placed it in the water, letting his hands linger in the solution.

When he had dried the little weapon and its single clip thoroughly, using his shirt, he took a small tube of lubricant from his pocket and lubricated both pieces. Slipping the weapon into his belt at the small of his back, he reached for what was left in the bag. Nothing flickered blue. He removed the jacket, put it on, pulling the sleeves all the way to his wrists and hiding the chalk-colored hand of the prosthesis in a jacket pocket.

Bending over, he took a needle from his shoe. Using the shattered mirror above the basin, he lanced the scars on his right cheek and drained them, pressing with his fingers until the silicon was entirely gone.

With the needle he gouged flesh from his earlobe, removed the stud, dipped a bandage in the blood, and wrapped the earlobe with the bandage, taping it securely. Then he removed the colored contact lenses, let one fall to the floor, and reversed the other, so that it was opaque. With his spit—the enzymes in it—he scrubbed the swarthiness from his face and, using his chin, rubbed the dragon from his good arm.

When he looked up into the shattered silver of the mirror, the man he saw matched the photograph in the second set of papers.

On the train an hour later he was asked again for his documents. Soldiers gathered around him. Nothing flickered blue.

The captain who questioned him did his best to provoke him, but the man with the bleeding ear and blind eye—drunk, barely coherent—would not oblige. He was pathetic, a displaced *hacenado* from Paluma or Machla perhaps, judging from his garbled accent and the fragments of *yerga*. The captain grew bored and moved on.

It was on the slower, rural train hours later that something about it began to feel odd. *There was no blue.*

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Certainly The Singer and his people knew he was coming. El Cantor had his infrastructure, his nets. Who didn't these days? Surely he had his people among the employers.

Yet no one had tried to stop him.

He sat on the hard seat of the old train as it moved through the *campo* and began to climb, and for the first time in years felt uneasy in the absence of the blue.

Just outside Nonoava, on the grade to Santa Arcelia, he jumped from the train and made his way through the *barranca* to the village that lay only a few kilometers from the adobe. Something made him walk the streets of the village longer than he might have, curious, trying to draw them out. But there was no blue. Eyes followed him from doorways and windows, but they were *campesino* eyes. They would have followed anyone, like a child's.

Here, this far into the interior, the posters were not defaced, and from the *taberna* doorways with their arcade games, and the windows with their pretty flower boxes, came the sounds of radios, and the songs.

Este es el fin, mi amigo
This is the end, my friend,
If we lose heart.
This is the end
If we forget
The red earth of our homes,
Our sisters dancing at *carnaval*,
Our father's sweat in the fields,
Our mother's lullabyes,
As we slept and dreamt
Safe in the arms of our people.

This is the end, my friend,
If we believe the snake
That holds us tight
Is our brother.

As he reached the end of the village, he saw a man watching him from the shadows of a pepper tree. The afternoon rains had begun, and the air was thick in his lungs. The man leaned against a wall and stared.

Would it begin here? The adobe was six kilometers away. Each kilometer he put behind him from this point on increased his threat to them immeasurably. They *had* to know this.

He jerked from a sound, but did not tense.

The sound came again and he turned. At the end of the main street

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a few people had gathered, laughing. He could see the papier maché head of a cayman, dancing. Sticks began to beat a rhythm. A woman appeared with a rubber snake around her waist, heavy but light on her feet. A second flute joined the first.

It was the wrong month for *carnaval*. This was something else.

The concert at dawn. Yes.

When he left the village, heading from the deforested fields into hills where the canopy would cast shadows to hide him, the man by the tree did not follow.

On the ridge half a kilometer from the last *barranca* before the adobe, he cut back and waited by the path, removing the contact lens. When no one came, he resumed the climb, checking the skies for "birddogs" and gliders and the trees and earth for the kinds of booby-traps men would always make. The blue would keep him alive, yes. But sometimes merely alive was not enough.

He had learned his lesson in Afghanistan.

It had cost him an arm.

There is a picture, one without feeling. Of a young man and a young woman and a night. There is a cot, and the barracks where the cot sits are empty. There is enough moonlight that the boy can see the girl beside him as she moves her hands, looking for him, her breath catching suddenly when he finds her instead. He says her name and she laughs. She teases him, and he begins in seriousness. He will remember her breathing, like a child's at first, then wilder even than his toward the end. He will think of nothing but her skin and her voice as they hunt each other in the North Carolina woods, doing badly at their games, the colonel angry with them both. Months from now he will lose count of the times they made love on this cot. Months from now he will find himself wondering whether his father ever made love as the world turned blue, whether her mother, the Namvet Army nurse who dreamed of her patients' deaths before she met them, ever made love to one of them.

This night is the first. Because it is, it will remain in his memory long after the others have faded, long after all feeling has left. It will remain for him as clear as the night, a year later, when she tells him it is over, and he understands what she is saying: Her white skin against the other boy's yellow skin, his Amerasian face beside hers on this very cot, his talent helping her, even here, to love him.

As night fell, he was in the hills above the village, two kilometers from the adobe his employers had assured him was the one. They would have no reason to lie. He would, they had told him, have to kill the man before he left for the stadium. If the man were able to stir up the three hundred

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thousand students, unionists and *campesinos* who would be there—and some of the soldiers, too—it would take everything they had in San Juan del Negro—National Guard and Army battalions and whatever advisers were on loan—to stop it. It would be the worst yet. It might be the beginning of the end, and certainly the bull-like man's own nation would not want this, would it?

He told them he had no nation and they smiled.

He let his talent guide him through the moonless night. The scratches and cuts he got were meaningless. They would not turn the world blue.

He approached the adobe from the darkness to the south and slowed when he glimpsed the pale perimeter wall. Heavy rain fell now and the wind was thick and warm. It would be here that they would try it. The perimeter was the first security zone, and once through it he would represent an unacceptable threat. It would be here. *Campesinos* with old rifles perhaps, the ballast of The Singer's "army." Or his best commandos, the young, energetic students—sons and daughters of lawyers and professors—who had the passion, the ideology, had read Marighella and Mao and Debray but knew nothing of house-to-house tactics. What they lacked in skill, El Cantor would *help* them make up for in other ways.

It would not be The Singer himself, no. Even if he wished it, his people—his closest lieutenants, the women who loved him, the men who would die for him—would not let him do it. He was, after all, The Singer. He was needed at dawn.

He stood just inside the treeline gazing at the terrain between jungle and wall. There were seven basic technologies, as well as every booby-trap ever made, but would they have made the effort here? Geophones would be worthless in the foliage. Microwave and infrared needed juice and a clear range. Trip wires made no sense with an encouraged 360 approach. Only the wall made sense. Sunken geophones, contact wires perhaps. Even that . . .

He approached the wall slowly and saw that it was crumbling, the plaster nearly gone from the adobe. Shards of glass once embedded in cement along its top had disappeared long ago, and the old strand of stamped concertina had lost its mounting every two or three meters. Ten meters down the wall what looked like a heavy iron gate had pulled from its woodframe hinges, inviting, transparent. He didn't need it. He could go over the wall easily at any point.

He listened. Nothing was blue. Not even this wall was a threat.

A smell like spoiled milk drifted to him from somewhere, and he could not place it. A night bird burst suddenly from a tree in the darkness, startling him, the sound reminding him of the rockets they used in Guatemala. The night fell silent again and he began walking.

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As he rounded the wall, he came upon it.

The jungle had reclaimed it and most eyes would have missed it in the night. The helipad had been small to begin with, and the wreckage that lay inside the vines nearly covered it. This had been a *traficante's* base, and this told him other things. The outer walls of the house would be strong. There would be hidden rooms on both floors and compartments in the walls and floors for weapons and product. There might even be a second perimeter wall just inside the first, and in better condition. His employers hadn't mentioned this, but it did not matter. Perhaps they had not known.

The sour milk smell drifted to him again and he shook his head to clear it. It had not come from the house. The wind was behind him. A night-blooming plant. Sewage. A dead animal.

He went over the wall quietly, avoiding the rusty concertina without thinking about it, found a second wall in worse repair, slipped over it, and, landing in the weeds on the other side, smelled the smell again. The picture that came to him then made no sense: Rice paddies. Canals with this smell. Bodies floating, as if in spoiled milk.

He had never smelled this smell before. He had *heard* about it, that was all.

He had never been to Southeast Asia. He could not have smelled it.

The man, lying on the sofa, tells him and he—

He jerked from the memory, felt the rain on his scalp, looked back once at the wreckage in the vines, and took a step.

For a moment there were sounds—voices, and what might have been a gunship's sudden propwash—and then they were gone, the night once again quiet except for the warm wind and the soft rattle of rain on leaves.

He shook his head again, waiting for the blue to come. There was none. He checked his body for hunger, insufficient calories, glucose imbalance, anything that might explain it—the smell, the sounds—and found nothing.

A war that belongs to their parents, not them, a war that—

For a moment he wondered if a poison had gotten through, hallucinogen, virus—something planted by The Singer's infrastructure or his employers' own, a set-up, an abort with the operative silenced. It was possible. Anything was. His employers *wanted* him to fail—a coalition of new interests—exactly what had happened to him in Chad and again in Canada in '96. The hotel room, the doorknob, the locker handle, the jacket. A blue so faint he had missed it or assumed it had meant something else. There were new things on the market all the time—bacterial vectors, triggered aerials.

The moment passed.

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His body did not feel odd and there was no blue.

Except for the smell, the fading sounds, nothing at all was odd.

There is a picture of a man, lying on a sofa, telling a boy about a war that should never have been, the war he ran from, living while others died. The boy listens. He is six or seven, no more than this. He listens, wanting to understand. He feels—

He stopped the picture. His hands were shaking. It was adrenalin, he told himself, nothing more.

Inside the second wall, where the branches of mimosa and banyan trees met weeds as tall as his waist, he looked toward the two-story house and the lighted windows downstairs. Dining room, *comedor*. This would be their TOC, their war room.

The light flickered—candles, not figures moving before an electric light. Why?

The windows glowed. The rest was darkness.

When he became aware of the figure standing a few meters from him—the glint of a weapon, the sound of a hand rubbing the stubble of a beard—he did not believe it.

The figure was watching him, yet there was no blue.

He shook his head to clear it. Was the figure really there? Was it no more real than the voices and propwash and smell?

He blinked. The figure remained.

He felt the muscles of his body tighten and remembered how many years it had been since he had last felt this, a tightening without the blue. Was there something wrong with his talent? Had they somehow gotten a limbic or T-lobe inhibitor to him, something that could keep his talent from working, when nothing before had been able to? A man with a weapon not more than five meters from him? There should have been blue.

He made the muscles relax. The smell was gone; the sounds were gone. All that was left was a sentry, flesh and blood, and that could be explained. If they weren't expecting him—if their intelligence were truly that bad—a guard would assume he was one of them, alone there in the shadows, ear bandaged, walking quietly, no weapon visible.

He gave the figure a silent wave, the figure waved back, and before the man could speak he was angling toward the house, putting trees between them quickly.

He chose the darkest part of the house and had the woven monofilament with its two tiny molybdenum grapples out and ready in the palm of his hand when he reached the balcony. He threw it silently and when it caught, pulled himself up with the only slip-gather hold that would work with line like this.

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On the rotting balcony he kept his bulk gentle and quiet as he made his way through the precarious darkness of collapsing beams and missing planks. No sounds of alarm reached him. No blue flickering even for an instant.

It made no sense. Was The Singer here? Had he ever been?

When the first four windows and two doors on the balcony refused to open, he flung the grapples again, went over the roof, and within seconds was on the inside balcony, looking out over the dark courtyard, at the staircase that led down to it. Dropping to the stairs, he began down.

Halfway down, it happened. The darkness turned blue at last.

There were figures crawling up the stairs. He could see them.

The blue was beautiful, familiar and comfortable. The figures came on, dark and silent, and he knew what to do.

The Ingram was out and he was firing, the electronic trigger tearing the night with sound.

But it was wrong. It was blue, yes—the familiar blue—but it was not the courtyard. In the corners of his eyes he could see a different house, bougainvilleas, not mimosas, plaster on woodframe, not adobe, French colonial, not Spanish—

He danced away from the figures, killing them easily.

It was still wrong. The figures were dark because of what they were wearing, not because of the night. They were coming up the stairs with satchel charges because one of the last clean province officials lived here—wasn't that it? The bull-like man's team of PRUs were here to protect him. Yes, that was it. The damn Charlies in their Number 10 black pajamas were in the courtyard and he had to stop them with his Swedish K. Not an Ingram. No, not an Ingram.

It was wrong. All of it.

It was something that had happened long ago—to someone else.

There is a picture like the others, of a boy whose father is still his father, before the major takes him away. His father is telling him again. It is the second or third time and like the others, the man is crying: about the ones he lost, the ones who died while he stayed alive—always able to save himself, and never others. When he remembers these things, he cannot help it, he cries, and the boy feels—

He stopped it.

He cries. He tells the boy—

He could hear it, the whump-whump-whump of the Chinook hitting the LZ just beyond the wall. The rockets passing overhead like birds (they often gave his head a turn, Georgia boy that he was, growing up with quail that sounded like that and a brand-new Ithaca in the blind at dawn) and he shot the sappers on the stairs, dancing away from them, none of it blue because his talent had never been blue—just a twist in

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the gut, real simple, telling him where to move and when and how, leaving the colors and that "trippy stuff" to the boy who would go on long after he himself was through, drunk and sick of it, go on with Larkin no matter what he tried to tell him about that war—the immorality, the friends you couldn't save because it didn't work that way.

When he shot the last figure, everything cleared. The courtyard was the courtyard again—adobe, mimosas, bougainvillea that glowed in the dark. The blue was gone.

He looked down at the bodies on the stairs, wondering why they were so silent.

The bodies were not human.

Some were motionless, some writhing and snapping, yet all were silent.

He had seen dogs like these before—but in Debrecen, Eastern Europe, a decade ago. The heavy chests that gave them another twenty kilos; the low brow and thick skulls that could deflect a .45 slug at the right angle; the silence, genetic and trained, even as they died.

The Kaschek Dobermans weighed over fifty kilos a piece and there were ten of them here, dying or dead on the shattered stairs. There were no satchel charges. No socks full of rice slung over black shoulders. No epicanthic folds to the eyes.

It had to be a drug. They had gotten it to him somehow—his people or Mark's—and though it hadn't stopped the blue, *couldn't* stop it, it was making him see and hear these things.

Someone had set the dogs loose, and as he saw movement in the courtyard, he fired—not needing the blue—and heard a body slam into tile, screaming. The screaming went on and on while the man they called The Way ran down the stairs past the bodies, the Ingram held high.

He told himself The Singer was simply not here, that he had left rather than face him, or that his employers' intelligence had been wrong, and that in any case there was no way in the world he could find the man before dawn.

Son Tay, a voice said. *Jesus, what a mess that was.*

He shook his head again. He *knew* that voice—

—the man crying, while the boy feels—

He stopped the picture.

It came again.

He stopped it again, hands shaking.

At the bottom of the stairs, he glanced through the bright window into the big room and froze.

There—framed by the bare white walls, by white *bancos* that bordered them, by flickering candlelight—was the man he sought. He knew the face.

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The man lay on one of the benches that bordered the room, face upturned, eyes open.

A young boy in loose white clothes knelt beside him, holding a cup and towel. Both of them were still, as frozen as he was.

There was no blue.

He was at the window, breaking it, had the Ingram aimed, was remembering how the young man Larkin had sent after him that day—the day they had pulled him from Larkin screaming, the day he had run from them all—had died like this: jerking, jerking on the ground, his muscles and tendons tearing one another from their own efforts, as his talent tried to keep him from the rounds, but could not, as the bullets from the bull-like man's Tamirin, cyclic rate of 1200, tore at him there on the ground, each guided by the better blue talent of the man he had grown up with and somehow been sent to kill. Why had Larkin done this? Why had he sent Bobby, the weakest of them, after him, knowing how it would end?

To punish you for leaving, a voice said and he knew that voice—sober, no longer crying now. *To make you kill someone you might have loved.*

He tore himself from the voice, from the pictures. They meant nothing. How could they mean a thing?

Even with the breaking of glass the man and the boy had not moved.

The man called The Way held the pistol steady.

The man on the *banco* did not turn. *Why?*

He was pulling slowly on the trigger when he saw it.

The man on the *banco* was gaunt and pale. The man was ill. How had he missed this? Sweat shone on the man's forehead. Could he move at all? It would be an easy kill. It would be as if the man had no talent of his own. He might even be able to shoot him without killing the boy, though that didn't matter.

The man on the *banco* moved at last, accepting the cup from the boy beside him. The boy was shaking but did not turn. He put the cloth to the man's face and touched it gently. The boy said something. The man answered and the boy seemed to calm.

The boy got up slowly, stiffly, doing his best not to look back toward the window where the glass had shattered, where the screaming could still be heard from the courtyard, where weapon fire moments before had exploded the night. Without turning, the boy walked slowly from the room.

The man on the *banco* fell back. He was, the bull-like man saw now, grotesquely thin under the loose white pants and shirt.

It would be the easiest kill in his life. He would be out of the country in a few hours, the payment in an electronic account, phone-accessible,

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in Luxembourg, his employers and The Singer's people unaware of the little airstrip near the Colombian border that had gotten him out.

The screaming stopped.

He looked at the man lying on the *banco* and began to squeeze the trigger again.

The world was not blue. *He isn't even trying.*

Later, he would ask himself why he did not pull the trigger then, when it was easy. Was it the man's illness? A need to see the man's eyes when he did it? He would have an answer, but it would be neither of these.

His finger relaxed.

He pulled the pistol from the window, stepped to the massive wooden door, opened it, and entered a room that was as bright as a sun.

The man did not turn.

He chose a corner protected from the windows and door and felt himself relax, his breathing normal, the parasympathetic overload seeping away. It was not Southeast Asia. It was the adobe, and this, a man he had once known. That was all. The room was yellow from candlelight. It was not blue.

When he was ten feet from the figure, the Ingram up and ready, the face still did not turn, but the figure spoke at last.

The bull-like man tensed.

The voice was barely human, deeper than he remembered it, changed beyond what the years—even an illness—should have done to it.

"Hello, Waylon," the voice said.

The bull-like man said nothing.

"Did you have to kill him?" the voice said slowly, disembodied, something from a dream. "He wasn't armed. There shouldn't have been any blue. Was there?"

The bull-like man did not answer.

"He wasn't supposed to let them out," the voice said slowly. "But he was worried about me. You can understand that."

The voice was dreamy, thoughtful and sad, and as the bull-like man looked at the face, at the body on the *banco*, it wasn't illness he saw.

"You're not taking care of yourself, Danny Boy," the bull-like man said, feeling the contempt rise like bile at the back of his throat. "Chemical abuse will do that to you, Danny Boy."

The figure on the bench laughed softly and the laugh became a cough that would not stop. When it was through, the voice said wetly:

"You don't think I look well, Waylon?"

"You look like shit, Danny Boy," he said. "The worst kind. The terrs in Brussels and Antwerp. *You* remember. Trillazine assassins every one of them."

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"Yes," the voice said. "I remember, Waylon."

The figure turned to look at him and when the bull-like man saw the eyes, he felt something move through him like electricity. He took a step back, breathing fast, the machine pistol up again, waiting for the blue.

It did not come.

He had never seen eyes like these. The pupils dilated as if in shock. The whites showing under them in *sanpacu*, the illness of Mideast witchcraft, junkies, and walljackers. There was something in them, he realized, that should not have been there—different, stronger than he remembered it.

There is a picture. A boy, smiling. Epicanthic folds. Skin like brass. Eyes that can—

He stopped the picture. There was no blue; there was no threat.

The eyes were still on him but the electricity was gone now. It was his own tired wariness, he told himself—the absence of blue, the tension from it—that had made him feel it. Nothing more.

The voice came again, hoarse and weak, the eyes holding his—black agates, scleras like crescent moons.

"Do *you* remember?" it said.

"I remember nothing, Danny Boy. I barely remember your name."

"Yet you remember why you are here."

"You're a sovbloc tool, Danny Boy. You're dripping connections. You sing for them. You even use their dogs."

"And that is why you are here?"

The bull-like man smiled. "Of course not."

The room was silent.

"You think it's the money," the voice said suddenly—or was it the eyes that somehow spoke, "when it is only that you have not yet forgiven me."

There is a picture: A boy and girl and a night—

The figure moved, rising up on one elbow, the eyes still on him.

"Mary?" the voice said suddenly.

The bull-like man stopped breathing.

In the doorway where the boy had disappeared a woman appeared, a Tamirin in her hands. For the briefest moment he imagined that her face—so different, yet so familiar—was blue. It *had* to be. The weapon. Her talent. The two of them against one of him now.

But it was not blue. Nothing was, and he knew, without the slightest doubt, that someone had gotten something to him, the drug working at last, his talent dead, and that if he didn't kill them both right now they would kill him.

He jerked the Ingram up, finger against the plastic of the trigger, wanting so much to pull it, wondering which he should kill first, whether the woman's talent could cause him any real trouble—*nocturnal precog*

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like her mother, a dreamer, decent with mission plans but lousy in a firefight.

"Put it down, Mary," the voice said. The woman hesitated, then obeyed, laying the weapon on the tile floor.

"She's worried about me, Waylon," the voice said, "just like Benito. She thinks you are here to kill me."

The room was quiet. Then the voice said:

"She has something to say, if you will let her."

The woman was staring at him, her hands, naked without the weapon, nervous at her sides.

"Hello, Waylon," she said, just as the voice had.

Her hair was the same color. The body was more angular, the hips fuller. The face, though harsher, was the same. The same life and spirit he had known once.

He could tell she wanted to go to the body on the *banco*, to help it, and for an instant saw her hands touching it—the gaunt body, the yellow skin under the clothes.

He jerked but felt nothing.

She did not move. Her mouth was open to speak.

He listened for sounds outside, footsteps, voices. There were none. He would kill them when he needed to. They were stupid to think they could talk him out of it. Her talent should have shown her this. She should never had laid the weapon down.

What lines would they use—what rhetoric? What worlds had they been through since Carolina, Chad, and Canada? How had these changed them?

The woman was speaking.

"He is not what you think he is, Waylon."

"And what do I think he is?" he heard himself say.

"You think he is a man."

The bull-like man smiled.

"I wouldn't know. Is he—a man?"

She understood and looked away.

"He is a *singer*, Waylon," she said at last.

"That is what he does, Mary, not what he is. Even that he does for someone else. Fifty years ago they'd have called him a 'dupe.' You remember the word. You remember who taught us."

"He sings for the people, Waylon. They need someone to sing for them. You don't know what they've been through."

He was getting tired.

"He's not a dupe," she was saying. "He takes the dogs they give him but it means nothing. They don't *own* him. They think they do but they don't. He sings for a country that needs his songs and he'll keep singing

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even when the *colorados* try to take control, which they will, and he'll beat them too. It belongs to the people, Waylon. He wants it to be theirs and he can do it. He's not like you or me."

The bull-like man stared at her.

"He's a *helper*, Mary," he said at last, tired. "He makes people feel what he wants them to feel, just like his father. The son just happens to be a whole lot better at it."

Her eyes were wet. She was, he saw suddenly, crying.

Jesus . . . The contempt rose again, like bile, and he wondered what Larkin would think. *His babies.*

They were barely alive, these two. They were so feral they were crazy. They were living on drugs and rhetoric and nights on cots, if they still could get it up. Nothing more. *Of course* the room wasn't blue. There was nothing here to turn it blue.

"That's not true, Waylon," the woman was saying. "He helps them feel what they *already*, feel, but won't or can't face because they have forgotten how, because they have lived in fear so long. He doesn't make them feel what it isn't in them to feel. He has changed, Waylon. He really has."

The bull-like man said nothing. The voice, melancholic, said:

"You see how he won't forgive me, Mary."

The voice was insane, he saw now. Feeling the eyes on him, he turned.

The eyes glittered. The darkness of the pupils was as bright as any light. The power was still there, yes—he could feel it—but it did not touch him, *could* not touch him. He understood this now.

The man was afraid.

The man was insane and afraid.

The contempt rose again.

"If he were merely a man," the woman was saying somewhere, "I wouldn't care. You would be right. Larkin and the men who hired you would be right. You would kill us and that would be the way it's always been, the death of cattle, country after country, those with the power using it, no one able to change a thing, because the actors are always the same. But it isn't like that, Waylon. Daniel isn't what you think he is. He's—"

"I know, Mary. *More than you or I. . . .*"

He was tired now. The adrenalin was wearing off, the lassitude that always followed starting. The words meant nothing. They could never mean a thing.

"He wasn't supposed to let the dogs loose, Waylon. He got scared."

Was it the woman or the man speaking?

"It doesn't matter," he heard himself say.

"Does he know," the voice said from somewhere, "who's behind this?"

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"I'm not sure," the woman answered. "I don't think so."

"Do you know, Waylon," the voice said, sounding as tired as he was, "why your employers chose you?"

Larkin and the men who hired you . . ., the woman had said. It had meant nothing then.

"That's not possible," he heard himself say.

The voice started to answer, but the coughing began again, and when it was through, the voice was weaker, so weak that the bull-like man had to step closer to hear it.

"Everything is possible, Waylon," the voice said, the whisper hoarse. "You know that. Why should it be a coincidence that they chose you? Some of them were trained in the same places we were. You know how that goes. They send their best and brightest to our camps, and these return to rule a country. He wants us both dead, Waylon. We're feral—we're rogues now—and no father like Larkin wants that. No father wants his sons to leave. You should know that, too. You should know that better than anyone, Waylon."

The coughing began again and the bull-like man could not be sure whether the words had been spoken at all, whether he had heard them but they had not been spoken.

He did not remember raising the Ingram but suddenly he was firing it, the slugs entering the two bodies without the slightest hint of blue, the one on the *banco* jerking, jerking, the one by the door flying back against the white wall. But it was no longer the adobe outside San Juan del Negro or even the French mansion near Hue. The walls fell away, disappearing into mist. The bomb craters around him were filled with rain water, calm and beautiful, their surfaces catching the yellow burn of sunset, so much like candlelight. It was Lang Vei, he remembered, just after Tet. He was, yes, running toward them now, toward the bodies—*he* still alive, untouched by the rounds from the NVA battalion because of the gift God had given him, the rounds, as always, finding others instead, no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried.

He dropped to his knees by Yosawa, the demolitions sergeant he had earned his jump wings with at Ft. Benning, who looked so thin now, his jaw gone, his eyes staring with the pupils wide in shock. He tried to remember what they had done together on their last R&R—Saigon or Da Nang—but could not. He remembered only the terrible Japanese beer Yosawa liked, and how the man cried like a baby, hugging everyone, when he drank it.

He was kneeling beside Molley now, the one with the eyelashes like a girl's, the one who read from the Bible every night and told him he would save him, really save him, if he ever visited Caitlin, Louisiana after the war, how in the meantime, if it was okay, he would pray for

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him the way he prayed for his family. "What you can do for me," he told Molley now, though the eyes were closed, "is stay alive. Do it for me, Molley."

He said it again and the eyes did not open.

He went to Jackson, the man who raised rotweilers and loved his wife more than any man he had ever met.

He went to Baronas, too, and held him while he died, and told him yes, he would go to Hawaii and lie on a black sand beach and sing that song for him.

He went to Samuels and Clipper and Sebek and in the end, when the Chinook took the body bags away, found that there was no one else to go to.

The bull-like man was kneeling on the red earth of Hue Province and crying. He was his father, remembering. He was remembering the ones he had lost. When he looked up at last, he saw that the two people in the bright room were still alive. No blood. No bullet holes. The eyes of the man lying on the *banco* were on him, and they were eyes he had never seen before.

"You did this?" the bull-like man said suddenly.

"No," the voice answered. "It was in you. You did it, Waylon."

And a voice said: *I only helped.*

He knew then that the woman had dreamed it, that they had known all along how it would end.

Later, he would understand that it was not illness or drugs that made the man's body so thin, the voice weak, but instead what it took for him to do what he did, for him to do for three hundred thousand listeners more than any man should have been able to do.

There would be a concert at dawn even if the body were dying. The voice told him this. The woman told him this, too, so he knew it was true.

He did not want the body to die. There was a picture, one with feeling, of the seven of them together in the bright Carolina sun.

He did not want to lose this body too.

In the stadium at dawn, the man called Waylon Curtis—his namesake a country western singer his father had once loved—used the talent he had been born with to keep the body alive, even as the soldiers and jeeps and lasers moved around them both like a dream and the world burned blue for a day.

Later, he would realize he had done this without killing anyone, because the body had asked him to, and he would understand the miracle this was. ●

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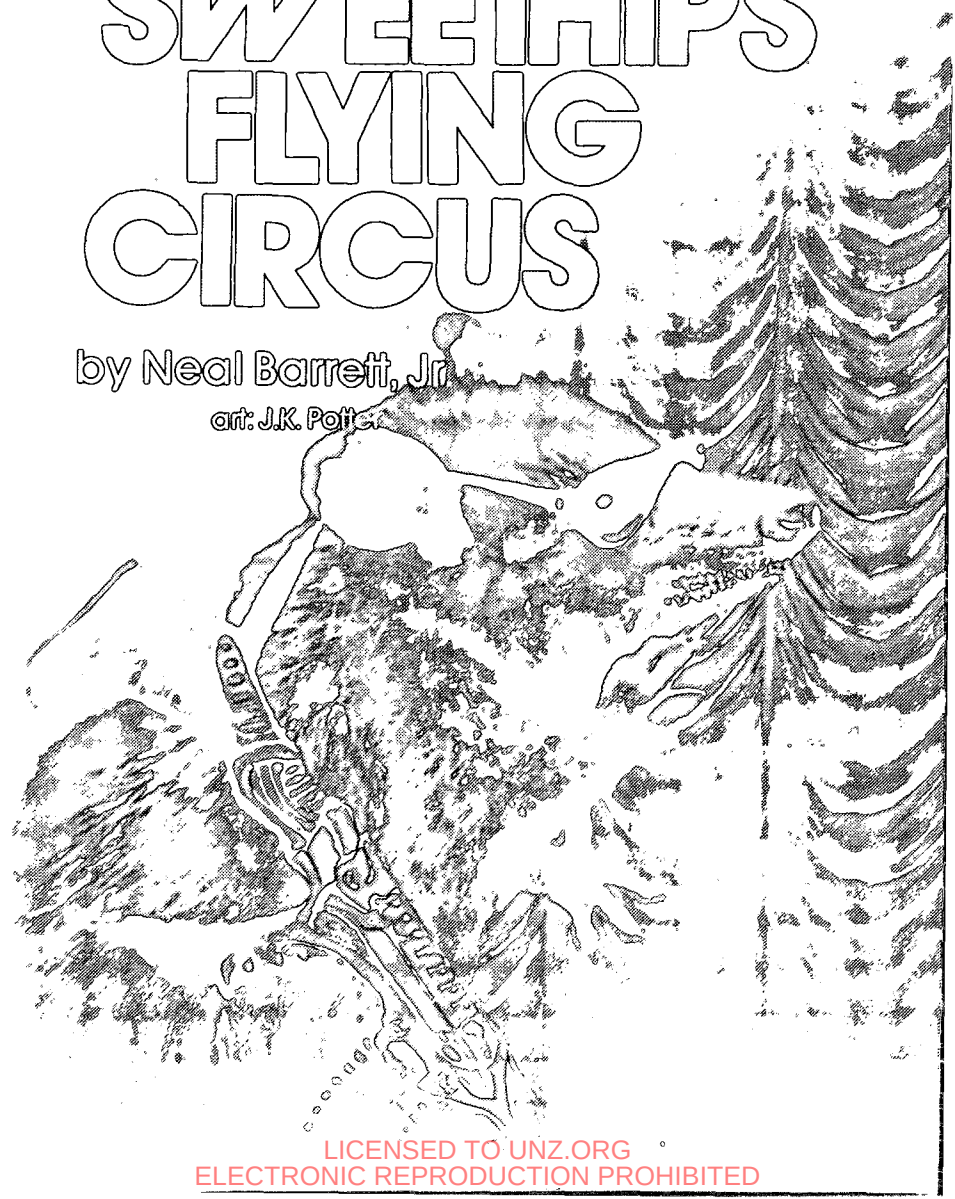
GINNY SWEETHIPS' FLYING CIRCUS

by Neal Barrett, Jr.

art: J.K. Potter



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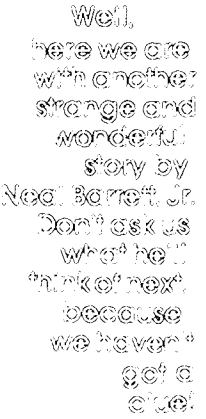

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Del drove and Ginny sat.

"They're taking their sweet time," Ginny said, "damned if they're not."

"They're itchy," Del said. "Everyone's itchy. Everyone's looking to stay alive."

"Huh!" Ginny showed disgust. "I sure don't care for sittin' out here in the sun. My price is going up by the minute. You wait and see if it doesn't."

"Don't get greedy," Del said.

Ginny curled her toes on the dash. Her legs felt warm in the sun. The stockade was a hundred yards off. Barbed wire looped above the walls. The sign over the gate read:

First Church of the Unleaded God
& Ace High Refinery
WELCOME
KEEP OUT

The refinery needed paint. It had likely been silver but was now dull as pewter and black rust. Ginny leaned out the window and called to Possum Dark.

"What's happening, friend? Those mothers dead in there or what?"

"Thinking," Possum said. "Fixing to make a move. Considering what to do." Possum Dark sat atop the van in a steno chair bolted to the roof. Circling the chair was a swivel-ring mount sporting fine twin-fifties black as grease. Possum had a death-view clean around. Keeping out the sun was a red Cinzano umbrella faded pink. Possum studied the stockade and watched heat distort the flats. He didn't care for the effect. He was suspicious of things less than cut and dried. Apprehensive of illusions of every kind. He scratched his nose and curled his tail around his leg. The gate opened up and men started across the scrub. He teased them in his sights. He prayed they'd do something silly and grand.

Possum counted thirty-seven men. A few carried sidearms, openly or concealed. Possum spotted them all at once. He wasn't too concerned. This seemed like an easy-going bunch, more intent on fun than fracas. Still, there was always the hope that he was wrong.

The men milled about. They wore patched denim and faded shirts. Possum made them nervous. Del countered that; his appearance set them at ease. The men looked at Del, poked each other and grinned. Del was scrawny and bald except for tufts around the ears. The dusty black coat was too big. His neck thrust out of his shirt like a newborn buzzard looking for meat. The men forgot Possum and gathered around, waiting to see what Del would do. Waiting for Del to get around to showing them

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what they'd come to see. The van was painted turtle-green. Gold Barnum type named the owner, and the selected vices for sale:

Ginny Sweethips' Flying Circus
* * * SEX * TACOS * DANGEROUS DRUGS * * *

Del puttered about with this and that. He unhitched the wagon from the van and folded out a handy little stage. It didn't take three minutes to set up, but he dragged it out to ten, then ten on top of that. The men started to whistle and clap their hands. Del looked alarmed. They liked that. He stumbled and they laughed.

"Hey, mister, you got a girl in there or not?" a man called out.

"Better be something here besides you," another said.

"Gents," Del said, raising his hands for quiet, "Ginny Sweethips herself will soon appear on this stage and you'll be more than glad you waited. Your every wish will be fulfilled, I promise you that. I'm bringing beauty to the wastelands, gents. Lust the way you like it, passion unrestrained. Sexual crimes you never dreamed!"

"Cut the talk, mister," a man with peach-pit eyes shouted to Del. "Show us what you got."

Others joined in, stomped their feet and whistled. Del knew he had them. Anger was what he wanted. Frustration and denial. Hatred waiting for sweet release. He waved them off but they wouldn't stop. He placed one hand on the door of the van—and brought them to silence at once.

The double doors opened. A worn red curtain was revealed, stenciled with hearts and cherubs. Del extended his hand. He seemed to search behind the curtain, one eye closed in concentration. He looked alarmed, groping for something he couldn't find. Uncertain he remembered how to do this trick at all. And then, in a sudden burst of motion, Ginny did a double forward flip, and appeared like glory on the stage.

The men broke into shouts of wild abandon. Ginny led them in a cheer. She was dressed for the occasion. Short white skirt shiny bright, white boots with tassels. White sweater with a big red "G" sewn on the front.

"Ginny Sweethips, gents," Del announced with a flair, "giving you her own interpretation of Barbara Jean the Cheerleader Next Door. Innocent as snow, yet a little bit wicked and willing to learn, if Biff the Quarterback will only teach her. Now, what do you say to *that*?"

They whistled and yelled and stomped. Ginny strutted and switched, doing long-legged kicks that left them gasping with delight. Thirty-seven pairs of eyes showed their needs. Men guessed at hidden parts. Dusted off scenarios of violence and love. Then, as quickly as she'd come, Ginny was gone. Men threatened to storm the stage. Del grinned without con-

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cern. The curtain parted and Ginny was back, blond hair replaced with saucy red, costume changed in the blink of an eye. Del introduced Nurse Nora, an angel of mercy weak as soup in the hands of Patient Pete. Moments later, hair black as a raven's throat, she was Schoolteacher Sally, cold as well water until Steve the Bad Student loosed the fury chained within.

Ginny vanished again. Applause thundered over the flats. Del urged them on, then spread his hands for quiet.

"Did I lie to you gents? Is she all you ever dreamed? Is this the love you've wanted all your life? Could you ask for sweeter limbs, for softer flesh? For whiter teeth, for brighter eyes?"

"Yeah, but is she *real*?" a man shouted, a man with a broken face sewn up like a sock. "We're religious people here. We don't fuck with no machines."

Others echoed the question with bold shouts and shaking fists.

"Now, I don't blame you, sir, at all," Del said. "I've had a few dolly droids myself. A plastic embrace at best, I'll grant you that. Not for the likes of *you*, for I can tell you're a man who knows his women. No, sir, Ginny's real as rain, and she's yours in the role of your choice. Seven minutes of bliss. It'll seem like a lifetime, gents, I promise you that. Your goods gladly returned if I'm a liar. And all for only a U.S. gallon of gas!"

Howls and groans at that, as Del expected.

"That's a *cheat* is what it is! Ain't a woman worth it!"

"Gas is better'n gold and we work damn hard to get it!"

Del stood his ground. Looked grim and disappointed. "I'd be the last man alive to try to part you from your goods," Del said. "It's not my place to drive a fellow into the arms of sweet content, to make him rest his manly frame on golden thighs. Not if he thinks this lovely girl's not worth the fee, no sir. I don't do business that way and never have."

The men moved closer. Del could smell their discontent. He read sly thoughts above their heads. There was always this moment, when it occurred to them there was a way Ginny's delights might be obtained for free.

"Give it some thought, friends," Del said. "A man's got to do what he's got to do. And while you're making up your minds, turn your eyes to the top of the van for a startling and absolutely free display of the slickest bit of marksmanship you're ever likely to see!"

Before Del's words were out of his mouth and on the way, before the men could scarcely comprehend, Ginny appeared again and tossed a dozen china saucers in the air.

Possum Dark moved in a blur. Turned a hundred-and-forty degrees in his bolted steno chair and whipped his guns on target, blasting saucers to dust. Thunder rolled across the flats. Crockery rained on the men

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below. Possum stood and offered a pink killer grin and a little bow. The men saw six-foot-nine and a quarter inches of happy marsupial fury and awesome speed, of black agate eyes and a snout full of icy varmint teeth. Doubts were swept aside. Fifty-calibre madness wasn't the answer. Fun today was clearly not for free.

"Gentlemen, start your engines," Del smiled. "I'll be right here to take your fee. Enjoy a hot taco while you wait your turn at glory. Have a look at our display of fine pharmaceutical wonders and mind-expanding drugs."

In moments, men were making their way back to the stockade. Soon after that, they returned toting battered tins of gas. Del sniffed each gallon, in case some buffoon thought water would get him by. Each man received a token and took his place. Del sold tacos and dangerous drugs, taking what he could get in trade. Candles and Mason jars, a rusty knife. Half a manual on full-field maintenance for the Chrysler Mark XX Urban Tank. The drugs were different colors but all the same: twelve parts oregano, three parts rabbit shit, one part marijuana stems. All this under Possum's watchful eye.

"By God." said the first man out of the van. "She's worth it, I'll tell you that. Have her do the Nurse, you won't regret it!"

"The Schoolteacher's best," said the second man through. "I never seen the like. I don't care if she's real or she ain't."

"What's in these tacos?" a customer asked Del.

"Nobody you know, mister," Del said.

"It's been a long day," Ginny said. "I'm pooped, and that's the truth." She wrinkled up her nose. "First thing we hit a town, you hose 'er out good now, Del. Place smells like a sewer or maybe worse."

Del squinted at the sky and pulled up under the scant shade of mesquite. He stepped out and kicked the tires. Ginny got down, walked around and stretched.

"It's getting late," Del said. "You want to go on or stop here?"

"You figure those boys might decide to get a rebate on this gas?"

"Hope they do," Possum said from atop the van.

"You're a pisser," Ginny laughed, "I'll say that. Hell, let's keep going. I could use a hot bath and town food. What you figure's up the road?"

"East Bad News," Del said, "if this map's worth anything at all. Ginny, night driving's no good. You don't know what's waiting down the road."

"I know what's on the roof," Ginny said. "Let's do it. I'm itchy all over with bugs and dirt and that tub keeps shinin' in my head. You want me to drive a spell, I sure will."

"Get in," Del grumbled. "Your driving's scarier than anything I'll meet."

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* * *

Morning arrived in purple shadow and metal tones, copper, silver, and gold. From a distance, East Bad News looked to Ginny like garbage strewn carelessly over the flats. Closer, it looked like larger garbage. Tin shacks and tents and haphazard buildings rehashed from whatever they were before. Cookfires burned, and the locals wandered about and yawned and scratched. Three places offered food. Other places bed and a bath. Something to look forward to, at least. She spotted the sign down at the far end of town:

MORO'S REPAIRS
Armaments • Machinery • Electronic Shit of All Kinds

"Hold it!" Ginny said. "Pull 'er in right there."

Del looked alarmed. "What for?"

"Don't get excited. There's gear needs tending in back. I just want 'em to take a look."

"Didn't mention it to me, Del said.

Ginny saw the sad and droopy eyes, the tired wisps of hair sticking flat to Del's ears. "Del, there wasn't anything to mention," she said in a kindly tone. "Nothing you can really put your finger on, I mean. Okay?"

"Whatever you think," Del said, clearly out of sorts.

Ginny sighed and got out. Barbed wire surrounded the yard behind the shop. The yard was ankle-deep in tangles of rope and copper cable, rusted unidentifiable parts. A battered pickup hugged the wall. Morning heat curled the tin roof of the building. More parts spilled out of the door. Possum made a funny noise, and Ginny saw the Dog step into the light. A Shepherd, maybe six-foot-two. It showed Possum Dark yellow eyes. A man appeared behind the Dog, wiping heavy grease on his pants. Bare to the waist, hair like stuffing out of a chair. Features hard as rock, flint eyes to match. Not bad looking, thought Ginny, if you cleaned him up good.

"Well now," said the man. He glanced at the van, read the legend on the side, took in Ginny from head to toe. "What can I do for *you*, little lady?"

"I'm not real little and don't guess I'm any lady," Ginny said. "Whatever you're thinking, don't. You open for business or just talk?"

The man grinned. "My name's Moro Gain. Never turn business away if I can help it."

"I need electric stuff."

"We got it. What's the problem?"

"Huh-unh." Ginny shook her head. "First I gotta ask. You do confidential work or tell everything you know?"

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"Secret's my middle name," Moro said. "Might cost a little more, but you got it."

"How much?"

Moro closed one eye. "Now, how do I know that? You got a nuclear device in there, or a broken watch? Drive it on in and we'll take a look." He aimed a greasy finger at Possum Dark. "Leave *him* outside."

"No way."

"No arms in the shop. That's a rule."

"He isn't carrying. Just the guns you see." Ginny smiled. "You can shake him down, if you like. *I* wouldn't, I don't think."

"He looks imposing, all right."

"I'd say he is."

"What the hell," Moro said, "drive it in."

Dog unlocked the gate. Possum climbed down and followed Dog with oily eyes.

"Go find us a place to stay," Ginny said to Del. "Clean, if you can find it. All the hot water in town. Christ sakes, Del, you still sulking or what?"

"Don't worry about me," Del said. "Don't concern yourself at all."

"Right." She hopped behind the wheel. Moro began kicking the door of his shop. It finally sprang free, wide enough to take the van. The supply wagon rocked along behind. Moro lifted the tarp, eyed the thirty-seven tins of unleaded with great interest.

"You get lousy mileage, or what?" he asked Ginny.

Ginny didn't answer. She stepped out of the van. Light came through broken panes of glass. The skinny windows reminded her of a church. Her eyes got used to shadow, and she saw that that's what it was. Pews sat to the side, piled high with auto parts. A 1997 Olds was jacked up before the altar.

"Nice place you got here," she said.

"It works for me," Moro told her. "Now what kind of trouble you got? Something in the wiring? You said electric stuff."

"I didn't mean the motor. Back here." She led him to the rear and opened the doors.

"God A'Mighty!" Moro said.

"Smells a little raunchy right now. Can't help that till we hose 'er down." Ginny stepped inside, looked back, and saw Moro still on the ground. "You coming up or not?"

"Just thinking."

"About what?" She'd seen him watching her move and didn't really have to ask.

"Well, *you* know . . ." Moro shuffled his feet. "How do you figure on paying? For whatever it is I got to do."

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"Gas. You take a look. Tell me how many tins. I say yes or no."

"We could work something out."

"We could, huh?"

"Sure." Moro gave her a foolish grin. "Why not?"

Ginny didn't blink. "Mister, what kind of girl do you think I am?"

Moro looked puzzled and intent. "I can read good, lady, believe it or not. I figured you wasn't tacos or dangerous drugs."

"You figured wrong," Ginny said. "Sex is just software to me, and don't you forget it. I haven't got all day to watch you moonin' over my parts. I got to move or stand still. When I stand still, you look. When I move, you look more. Can't fault you for that, I'm about the prettiest thing you ever saw. Don't let it get in the way of your work."

Moro couldn't think of much to say. He took a breath and stepped into the van. There was a bed bolted flat against the floor. A red cotton spread, a worn satin pillow that said DURANGO, COLORADO and pictured chipmunks and waterfalls. An end table, a pink-shaded lamp with flamingos on the side. Red curtains on the walls. Ballet prints and a naked Minnie Mouse.

"Somethin' else," Moro said.

"Back here's the problem," Ginny said. She pulled a curtain aside at the front of the van. There was a plywood cabinet, fitted with brass screws. Ginny took a key out of her jeans and opened it up.

Moro stared a minute, then laughed aloud. "*Sensory* tapes? Well, I'll be a son of a bitch." He took a new look at Ginny, a look Ginny didn't miss. "Haven't seen a rig like this in years. Didn't know there were any still around."

"I've got three tapes," Ginny explained. "A brunette, a redhead and a blond. Found a whole cache in Ardmore, Oklahoma. Had to look at 'bout three or four hundred to find girls that looked close enough to me. Nearly went nuts 'fore it was over. Anyway, I did it. Spliced 'em down to seven minutes each."

Moro glanced back at the bed. "How do you put 'em under?"

"Little needle comes up out the mattress. Sticks them in the ass lightnin' fast. They're out like *that*. Seven minute dose. Headpiece is in the endtable there. I get it on and off them real quick. Wires go under the floorboards back here to the rig."

"Jesus," Moro said. "They ever catch you at this, you are cooked, lady."

"That's what Possum's for," Ginny said. "Possum's pretty good at what he does. Now what's *that* look all about?"

"I wasn't sure right off if you were real."

Ginny laughed aloud. "So what do you think now?"

"I think maybe you are."

"Right," Ginny said. "It's Del who's the droid, not me. Wimp IX Series.

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Didn't make a whole lot. Not much demand. The customers think it's me, never think to look at him. He's a damn good barker and pretty good at tacos and drugs. A little too sensitive, you ask me. Well, nobody's perfect, so they say."

"The trouble you're having's in the rig?"

"I guess," Ginny said, "beats the hell out of me." She bit her lip and wrinkled her brow. Moro found the gestures most inviting. "Slips a little, I think. Maybe I got a short, huh?"

"Maybe." Moro fiddled with the rig, testing one of the spools with his thumb. "I'll have to get in here and see."

"It's all yours. I'll be wherever it is Del's got me staying."

"Ruby John's," Moro said. "Only place there is with a good roof. I'd like to take you out to dinner."

"Well sure you would."

"You got a real shitty attitude, friend."

"I get a whole lot of practice," Ginny said.

"And I've got a certain amount of pride," Moro told her. "I don't intend to ask you more than three or four times and that's it."

Ginny nodded. Right on the edge of approval. "You've got promise," she said. "Not a whole lot, maybe, but some."

"Does that mean dinner, or not?"

"Means not. Means if I *wanted* to have dinner with some guy, you'd maybe fit the bill."

Moro's eyes got hot. "Hell with you, lady. I don't need the company that bad."

"Fine." Ginny sniffed the air and walked out. "You have a nice day."

Moro watched her walk. Watched denims mold her legs, studied the hydraulics of her hips. Considered several unlikely acts. Considered cleaning up, searching for proper clothes. Considered finding a bottle and watching the tapes. A plastic embrace at best, or so he'd heard, but a lot less hassle in the end.

Possum Dark watched the van disappear into the shop. He felt uneasy at once. His place was on top. Keeping Ginny from harm. Sending feral prayers for murder to absent genetic gods. His eyes hadn't left Dog since he'd appeared. Primal smells, old fears and needs assailed his senses. Dog locked the gate and turned around. Didn't come closer, just turned.

"I'm Dog Quick," he said, folding hairy arms. "I don't much care for Possums."

"I don't much care for Dogs," said Possum Dark.

Dog seemed to understand. "What did you do before the War?"

"Worked in a theme park. Our Wildlife Heritage. That kind of shit. What about you?"

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"Security, what else?" Dog made a face. "Learned a little electrics. Picked up a lot more from Moro Gain. I've done worse." He nodded toward the shop. "You like to shoot people with that thing?"

"Anytime I get the chance."

"You ever play any cards?"

"Some." Possum Dark showed his teeth. "I guess I could handle myself with a Dog."

"For real goods?" Dog returned the grin.

"New deck, unbroken seal, table stakes," Possum said.

Moro showed up at Ruby John's Cot Emporium close to noon. Ginny had a semi-private stall, covered by a blanket. She'd bathed and braided her hair and cut the legs clean off her jeans. She tugged at Moro's heart.

"It'll be tomorrow morning," Moro said. "Cost you ten gallons of gas."

"Ten gallons," Ginny said. "That's stealin' and you know it."

"Take it or leave it," Moro said. "You got a bad head in that rig. Going to come right off, you don't fix it. You wouldn't like that. Your customers wouldn't like it any at all."

Ginny appeared subdued but not much. "Four gallons. Tops."

"Eight. I got to make the parts myself."

"Five."

"Six," Moro said. "Six and I take you to dinner."

"Five and a half and I want to be out of this sweatbox at dawn. On the road and gone when the sun starts bakin' your lovely town."

"Damn, you're fun to have around."

Ginny smiled. Sweet and disarming, an unexpected event. "I'm all right. You got to get to know me."

"Just how do I go about that?"

"You don't." The smile turned sober. "I haven't figured that one out."

It looked like rain to the north. Sunrise was dreary. Muddy, less-than-spectacular yellows and reds. Colors through a window no one had bothered to wash. Moro had the van brought out. He said he'd thrown in a lube and hosed out the back. Five and a half gallons were gone out of the wagon. Ginny had Del count while Moro watched.

"I'm honest," Moro said, "you don't have to do that."

"I know," Ginny said, glancing curiously at Dog, who was looking rather strange. He seemed out of sorts. Sulky and off his feed. Ginny followed his eyes and saw Possum atop the van. Possum showed a wet Possum grin.

"Where you headed now?" Moro asked, wanting to hold her as long as he could.

"South," Ginny said, since she was facing that direction.

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"I wouldn't," Moro said. "Not real friendly folks down there."

"I'm not picky. Business is business."

"No, sir," Moro shook his head. "*Bad* business is what it is. You got the Dry Heaves south and east. Doom City after that. Straight down and you'll hit the Hackers. Might run into Fort Pru, bunch of disgruntled insurance agents out on the flats. Stay clear away from them. Isn't worth whatever you'll make."

"You've been a big help," Ginny said.

Moro gripped her door. "You ever *listen* to anyone, lady? I'm giving good advice."

"Fine," Ginny said, "I'm 'bout as grateful as I can be."

Moro watched her leave. He was consumed by her appearance. The day seemed to focus in her eyes. Nothing he said pleased her in the least. Still, her disdain was friendly enough. There was no malice at all that he could see.

There was something about the sound of Doom City she didn't like. Ginny told Del to head south and maybe west. Around noon, a yellow haze appeared on the ragged rim of the world, like someone rolling a cheap dirty rug across the flats.

"Sandstorm," Possum called from the roof. "Right out of the west. I don't like it at all. I think we better turn. Looks like trouble coming fast."

There was nothing Possum said she couldn't see. He had a habit of saying either too little or more than enough. She told him to cover his guns and get inside, that the sand would take his hide and there was nothing out there he needed to kill that wouldn't wait. Possum Dark sulked but climbed down. Hunched in back of the van he grasped air in the shape of grips and trigger guards. Practiced rage and windage in his head.

"I'll bet I can beat that storm," Del said. "I got this feeling I can do it."

"Beat it where?" Ginny said. "We don't know where we are or what's ahead."

"That's true," Del said. "All the more reason then to get there soon as we can."

Ginny stepped out and viewed the world with disregard. "I got sand in my teeth and in my toes," she complained. "I'll bet that Moro Gain knows right where storms'll likely be. I'll bet that's what happened, all right."

"Seemed like a decent sort to me," Del said.

"That's what I mean," Ginny said. "You can't trust a man like that at all."

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The storm had seemed to last a couple of days. Ginny figured maybe an hour. The sky looked bad as cabbage soup. The land looked just the way it had. She couldn't see the difference between sand recently gone or newly arrived. Del got the van going again. Ginny thought about yesterday's bath. East Bad News had its points.

Before they topped the first rise, Possum Dark began to stomp on the roof. "Vehicles to port," he called out. "Sedans and pickup trucks. Flatbeds and semis. Buses of all kinds."

"What are they doing?" Del said.

"Coming right at us, hauling timber."

"Doing *what?*" Ginny made a face. "Damn it all, Del, will you stop the car? I swear you're a driving fool."

Del stopped. Ginny climbed up with Possum to watch. The caravan kept a straight line. Cars and trucks weren't exactly hauling timber . . . but they were. Each carried a section of a wall. Split logs bound together, sharpened at the top. The lead car turned and the others followed. The lead car turned again. In a moment, there was a wooden stockade assembled on the flats, square as if you'd drawn it with a rule. A stockade and a gate. Over the gate a wooden sign:

FORT PRU
Games of Chance & Amusement
Term • Whole Life • Half Life • Death

"I don't like it," said Possum Dark.

"You don't like anything's still alive," Ginny said.

"They've got small arms and they're a nervous-looking bunch."

"They're just horny, Possum. That's the same as nervous, or close enough." Possum pretended to understand. "Looks like they're pulled up for the night," she called to Del. "Let's do some business, friend. The overhead don't ever stop."

Five of them came out to the van. They all looked alike. Stringy, darkened by the sun. Bare to the waist except for collars and striped ties. Each carried an attaché case thin as two slices of bread without butter. Two had pistols stuck in their belts. The leader carried a fine-looking sawed-off Remington Twelve. It hung by a camou guitar strap to his waist. Del didn't like him at all. He had perfect white teeth and a bald head. Eyes the color of jellyfish melting on the beach. He studied the sign on the van and looked at Del.

"You got a whore inside or not?"

Del looked him straight on. "I'm a little displeased at that. It's not the way to talk."

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"Hey." The man gave Del a wink. "You don't have to give us the pitch. We're show business folk ourselves."

"Is that right?"

"Wheels of chance and honest cards. Odds I *know* you'll like. I'm head actuary of this bunch. Name's Fred. That animal up there has a piss-poor attitude, friend. No reason to poke that weapon down my throat. We're friendly people here."

"No reason I can see why Possum'd spray this place with lead and diarhetics," Del said. "Less you can think of something I can't."

Fred smiled at that. The sun made a big gold ball on his head. "I guess we'll try your girl," he told Del. "'Course we got to see her first. What do you take in trade?"

"Goods as fine as what you're getting in return."

"I've got just the thing." The head actuary winked again. The gesture was starting to irritate Del. Fred nodded, and a friend drew clean white paper from his case. "This here is heavy bond," he told Del, shuffling the edges with his thumb. "Fifty percent linen weave, and we got it by the ream. Won't find anything like it. You can mark on it good or trade it off. 7th Mercenary Writers came through a week ago. Whole brigade of mounted horse. Near cleaned us out, but we can spare a few reams. We got pencils too. Mirado 2s and 3s, unsharpened, with erasers on the end. When's the last time you saw *that*? Why, this stuff's good as gold. We got staples and legal pads. Claim forms, maim forms, forms of every sort. Deals on wheels is what we got. And *you* got gas under wraps in the wagon behind your van. I can smell it plain from here. Friend, we can sure talk some business with you there. I got seventeen rusty-ass guzzlers runnin' dry."

A gnat-whisker wire sparked hot in Del's head. He could see it in the underwriter's eyes. Gasoline greed was what it was, and he knew these men were bent on more than fleshly pleasure. He knew with androidial dread that when they could, they'd make their play.

"Well now, the gas is not for trade," he said as calmly as he could. "Sex and tacos and dangerous drugs is what we sell."

"No problem," the actuary said. "Why, no problem at all. Just an idea, is all it was. You get that little gal out here and I'll bring in my crew. How's half a ream a man sound to you?"

"Just as fair as it can be," Del said, thinking that half of that would've been fine, knowing dead certain now that Fred intended to take back whatever he gave.

"That Moro fellow was right," Del said. "These insurance boys are bad news. Best thing we can do is take off and let it go."

"Pooh," said Ginny, "that's just the way men are. They come in mad

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as foamin' dogs and go away like cats licking cream. That's the nature of the fornicatin' trade. You wait and see. Besides, they won't get funny with Possum Dark."

"You wouldn't pray for rain if you were afire," Del muttered. "Well, I'm not unhitching the gas. I'll set you up a stage over the tarp. You can do your number there."

"Suit yourself," Ginny said, kissing a plastic cheek and scooting him out the door. "Now get on out of here and let me start getting cute."

It seemed to be going well. Cheerleader Barbara Jean awoke forgotten wet dreams, left their mouths as dry as snakes. Set them up for Sally the Teach and Nora Nurse, secret violations of the soul. Maybe Ginny was right, Del decided. Faced with girlie delights, a man's normally shitty outlook disappeared. When he was done, he didn't want to wreck a thing for an hour or maybe two. Didn't care about killing for half a day. Del could only guess at this magic and how it worked. Data was one thing, sweet encounters something else.

He caught Possum's eye and felt secure. Forty-eight men waited their turns. Possum knew the calibre of their arms, the length of every blade. His black twin-fifties blessed them all.

Fred the actuary sidled up and grinned at Del. "We sure ought to talk about gas. That's what we ought to do."

"Look," Del said, "gas isn't for trade, I told you that. Go talk to those boys at the refinery, same as us."

"Tried to. They got no use for office supplies."

"That's not my problem," Del said.

"Maybe it is."

Del didn't miss the razor tones. "You got something to say, just say it."

"Half of your gas. We pay our way with the girl and don't give you any trouble."

"You forget about *him*?"

Fred studied Possum Dark. "I can afford losses better than you. Listen, I know what you are, friend. I know you're not a man. Had a CPA droid just like you 'fore the War."

"Maybe we can talk," Del said, trying to figure what to do.

"Say now, that's what I like to hear."

Ginny's first customer staggered out, wild-eyed and white around the gills. "Godamn, try the Nurse," he bawled to the others. "Never had nothin' like it in my life!"

"Next," Del said, and started stacking bond paper. "Lust is the name of the game, gents, what did I tell you, now?"

"The girl plastic too?" Fred asked.

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"Real as you," Del said. "We make some kind of deal, how do I know you'll keep your word?"

"Jesus," Fred said, "what do you think I am? You got my Life Underwriter's Oath!"

The second customer exploded through the curtain, tripped and fell on his face. Picked himself up and shook his head. He looked damaged, bleeding around the eyes.

"She's a tiger," Del announced, wondering what the hell was going on. " 'Scuse me a minute," he told Fred, and slipped inside the van. "Just what are you doing in here?" he asked Ginny. "Those boys look like they been through a thrasher."

"Beats me," Ginny said, halfway between Nora and Barbara Jean. "Last old boy jerked around like a snake having a fit. Started pulling out his hair. Somethin' isn't right here, Del. It's gotta be the tapes. I figure the Moro fellow's a cheat."

"We got trouble inside and out," Del told her. "The head of this bunch wants our gas."

"Well, he sure can't have it, by God."

"Ginny, the man's got bug-spit eyes. Says he'll take his chances with Possum. We better clear out while we can."

"Huh-unh." Ginny shook her head. "That'll rile 'em for sure. Give me a minute or two. We've done one Nora and a Sally. I'll switch them all to Barbara Jean and see."

Del slipped back outside. It seemed a dubious answer at best.

"That's some woman," said Fred.

"She's something else today. Your insurance boys have got her fired."

Fred grinned at that. "Guess I better give her a try."

"I wouldn't," Del said.

"Why not?"

"Let her calm down some. Might be more than you want to handle."

He knew at once this wasn't the thing to say. Fred turned the color of ketchup pie. "Why, you plastic piece of shit! I can handle any woman born . . . *or* put together out of a kit."

"Suit yourself," Del said, feeling the day going down the drain. "No charge at all."

"Damn right there's not." Fred jerked the next man out of line. "Get ready in there, little lady. I am going to handle *all* your policy needs!"

The men cheered. Possum Dark, who understood at least three-fifths of the trouble down below, shot Del a questioning look.

"Got any of those tacos?" someone asked.

"Not likely," Del said.

Del considered turning himself off. Android suicide seemed the answer. But in less than three minutes, unnatural howls began to come from the

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van. The howls turned to shrieks. Life underwriters went rigid. Then Fred emerged, shattered. He looked like a man who'd kicked a bear with boils. His joints appeared to bend the wrong way. He looked whomper-eyed at Del, dazed and out-of-synch. Everything happened then in seconds thin as wire. Del saw Fred find him, saw the oil-spill eyes catch him clean. Saw the sawed-off barrels match the eyes so fast even electric feet couldn't snatch him out of the way in time. Del's arm exploded. He let it go and ran for the van. Possum couldn't help. The actuary was below and too close. The twin-fifties opened up. Underwriters fled. Possum stitched the sand and sent them flying ragged and dead.

Del reached the driver's seat as lead peppered the van. He felt slightly silly. Sitting there with one arm, one hand on the wheel.

"Move over," Ginny said, "that isn't going to work."

"I guess not."

Ginny sent them lurching through the scrub. "Never saw anything like it in my life," she said aloud. "Turned that poor fella on, he started twisting out of his socks, bones snapping like sticks. Damndest orgasm I *ever* saw."

"Something's not working just right."

"Well, I can see that, Del. Jesus, what's that!"

Ginny twisted the wheel as a large part of the desert rose straight up in the air. Smoking sand rained down on the van.

"Rockets," Del said grimly. "That's the reason they figured that crazy-fingered Possum was a snap. Watch where you're going, girl!"

Two fiery pillars exploded ahead. Del leaned out the window and looked back. Half of Fort Pru's wall was in pursuit. Possum sprayed everything in sight, but he couldn't spot where the rockets were coming from. Underwriter assault cars split up, came at them from every side.

"Trying to flank us," Del said. A rocket burst to the right. "Ginny, I'm not real sure what to do."

"How's the stub?"

"Slight electric tingle. Like a doorbell half a mile away. Ginny, they get us in a circle, we're in very deep shit."

"They hit that gas, we won't have to worry about a thing. Oh Lord, now why did I think of that?"

Possum hit a semi clean on. It came to a stop and died, fell over like a bug. Del could see that being a truck and a wall all at once had its problems, balance being one.

"Head right at them," he told Ginny, "then veer off sharp. They can't turn quick going fast."

"Del!"

Bullets rattled the van. Something heavy made a noise. The van skewed to a halt.

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Ginny took her hands off the wheel and looked grim. "It appears they got the tires. Del, we're flat dead is what we are. Let's get out of this thing."

And do *what*? Del wondered. Bearings seemed to roll about in his head. He sensed a malfunction on the way.

The Fort Pru vehicles shrieked to a stop. Crazed life agents piled out and came at them over the flats, firing small arms and hurling stones. A rocket burst nearby.

Possum's guns suddenly stopped. Ginny grimaced in disgust. "Don't you tell me we're out of ammo, Possum Dark. That stuff's plenty hard to get."

Possum started to speak. Del waved his good arm to the north. "Hey now, would you look at that!"

Suddenly there was confusion in the underwriters' ranks. A vaguely familiar pickup had appeared on the rise. The driver weaved through traffic, hurling grenades. They exploded in clusters, bright pink bouquets. He spotted the man with the rocket, lying flat atop a bus. Grenades stopped him cold. Underwriters abandoned the field and ran. Ginny saw a fairly peculiar sight. Six black Harleys had joined the truck. Chow Dogs with Uzis snaked in and out of the ranks, motors snarling and spewing horsetails of sand high in the air. They showed no mercy at all, picking off stragglers as they ran. A few underwriters made it to cover. In a moment, it was over. Fort Pru fled in sectional disarray.

"Well, if that wasn't just in the nick of time," Del said.

"I hate Chow Dogs," Possum said. "They got black tongues, and that's a fact."

"I hope you folks are all right," Moro said. "Well now, friend, looks as if you've thrown an arm."

"Nothing real serious," Del said.

"I'm grateful," Ginny said. "Guess I got to tell you that."

Moro was taken by her penetrating charm, her thankless manner. The fetching smudge of grease on her knee. He thought she was cute as a pup.

"I felt it was something I had to do. Circumstances being what they are."

"And just what circumstances are that?" Ginny asked.

"That pesky Shepherd Dog's sorta responsible for any trouble you might've had. Got a little pissed when that Possum cleaned him out. Five-card stud, I think it was. 'Course there might have been marking and crimping of cards, I couldn't say."

Ginny blew hair out of her eyes. "Mister, far as *I* can see, you're not making a lot of sense."

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"I'm real embarrassed about this. That Dog got mad and kinda screwed up your gear."

"You let a *Dog* repair my stuff?" Ginny said.

"Perfectly good technician. Taught him mostly myself. Okay if you don't get his dander up. Those Shepherds are inbred, so I hear. What he *did* was set your tapes in a loop and speed 'em up. Customer'd get, say, twenty-six times his money's worth. Works out to a Mach 7 fuck. Could cause bodily harm."

"Lord, I ought to shoot you in the foot," Ginny said.

"Look," Moro said, "I stand behind my work and I got here quick as I could. Brought friends along to help, and I'm eating the cost of that."

"Damn right," Ginny said. The Chow Dogs sat their Harleys a ways off and glared at Possum. Possum Dark glared back. He secretly admired their leather gear, the Purina crests sewn on the backs.

"I'll be adding up costs," Ginny said. "I'm expecting full repairs."

"You'll get it. Of course you'll have to spend some time in Bad News. Might take a little while."

She caught his look and had to laugh. "You're a stubborn son of a bitch, I'll give you that. What'd you do with that Dog?"

"You want taco meat, I'll make you a deal."

"Yuck. I guess I'll pass."

Del began to weave about in roughly trapezoidal squares. Smoke started to curl out of his stub.

"For Christ's sake, Possum, sit on him or something," Ginny said.

"I can fix that," Moro told her.

"You've about fixed enough, seems to me."

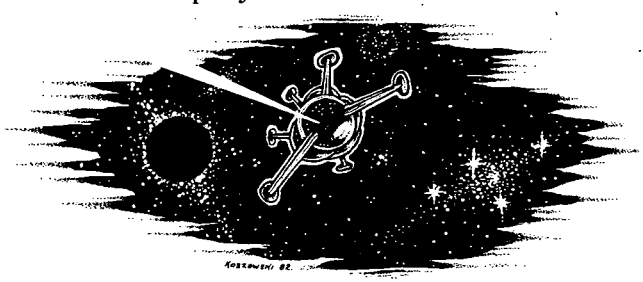
"We're going to get along fine. You wait and see."

"You think so?" Ginny looked alarmed. "I better not get used to having you around."

"It could happen."

"It could just as easy *not*."

"I'll see about changing that tire," Moro said. "We ought to get Del out of the sun. You think about finding something nice to wear to dinner. East Bad News is kinda picky." ●



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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

Lately, I've been wondering why people like horror. Do people enjoy being scared? Is it fun having that disconcerting feeling that something bad is going to happen to some perfectly innocent person?

And do people *like* the nightmares that horror can provoke, waking them up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat thanking God that it was only a dream.

The people who don't touch the stuff, either in their reading matter or films, can't fathom being interested in something so gruesome. It simply must be a malfunction of the organism.

I don't have any answers to offer. Though my first horror novel has been out for a few months, and I'm up to my neck in the next one, I don't know why I like to write the stuff. Or read it. Or see the movies.

Except this: Maybe horror is telling me something about the world that I need to know. Something about its mysteries, its dangers, and the potential for real evil in a world of nicely trimmed lawns and the Sunday funnies. Perhaps it's protection from too much complacency.

Games also seem to have been uncomfortable with horror. Despite the occasional bugaboo found in a *Dungeons and Dragons* adventure, the horror game has, except for one major exception, been decidedly neglected. The exception is the award-winning game, *Call of Cthulhu,* based on the otherworldly demons of H.P. Lovecraft.

Recently, though, there have been a pair of releases humorously dealing with what horror writers call "dark fantasy." *The Lurking Horror* is an entertaining game from Infocom (125 Cambridge Park Drive, Cambridge, MA 02140). Text adventures of Infocom, as I think I've stated before, have never been my cup of tea. All that text on the screen with nary a graphic in sight is generally too Spartan an experience for me. Not that the puzzle-adventures aren't clever or attractively packaged. But I'm not crazy about curling up with my monitor and typing in commands.

The Lurking Horror, though, lured me into its clutches in a number of ways. It came with a slimy creepy-crawlie, perfect for flinging in the soup at Sunday dinner. Since the story deals with subterranean horrors at a technical university, you get a student I.D. (with a magic pentagram on it) from George Un-

(Continued on page 191)

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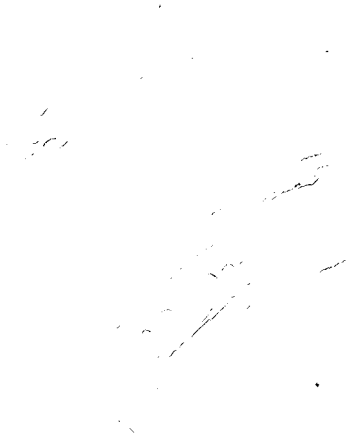

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The El station platform was empty, and the winter Chicago Sunday afternoon had turned into night. Stanley Paterson paused at the turnstile and rubbed his nose doubtfully. The overhead lamps cast circular pools of light on the gouged surface of the platform, but this made Stanley feel obvious, rather than safe. He hunched his shoulders inside his wool topcoat, puffed out his cheeks, and shuffled along the platform, looking down the tracks in the direction of the expected train. His mind was still full of the financial affairs of a medium-sized Des Moines metals trading company which was slated for acquisition. It was a big project, worth working weekends for, so, aside from the inside of his condominium, the inside of his office, and the inside of various El trains, he no longer knew what anything looked like. Winter had somehow arrived without an intervening autumn. He'd been to Oak St. Beach once, near the end of the summer, he remembered. Or had that been last year?

The wind blew dried leaves past him; delicately curved, ribbed, and textured leaves. He felt himself among them, heavy and gross, and thought about going on a diet. It was tough when you worked as hard as he did, he thought, excusing himself. It was hell on your eating habits. Today he'd eaten—what? He couldn't remember. The coat slapped his legs. The skin by his nose was oily, there was an itch under his right shoulder blade, and he was hungry. He wondered what he could put in the microwave when he got home. What did he have left in the freezer? Chinese? Chicken Kiev? Hell, he'd see when he got there. High above him floated the lighted windows of the city, rank upon rank, like cherubim.

The turnstile clattered. Stanley tried to tell himself that it was ridiculous to feel afraid, even in the dark, alone on the platform, but succeeded only in feeling afraid and ridiculous, both. He leaned forward, looking again for the train, trying to pull it into the station by the force of his gaze, but the tracks remained empty. He glanced towards the turnstile. A man stood there, a shadow. He didn't look like a big man, and his race was not obvious, but he wore a hat, which looked like leather. Respectable people did not wear hats, Stanley felt. Particularly not leather ones. It looked too silly. The man turned and, with slow, confident steps, walked towards Stanley.

Stanley thought about running, but didn't. It would have made him feel like a fool. He rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets, and ignored the other. He tried to project an air of quiet authority. The platform on the other side of the tracks was completely empty.

He never saw it, but he felt the knife press, sharp, against his side, just above the right kidney. There was, somehow, no doubt whatsoever about what it was.

"Your money."

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"Excuse me? I—"

"Your money."

The knife cut through the expensive fabric of his coat and grazed his flesh. Stanley felt a surge of annoyance at the wanton damage. Spontaneously, unthinkingly, like a tripped mousetrap, Stanley cried out and hit the man in the face with a balled fist, remembering only at the last second not to put his thumb inside his fingers. It was like striking out in sleep, but he did not awaken, as he usually did, sweat-soaked and tangled in sheets. Instead, the dark cold night remained around him, and as the man stumbled back, Stanley grappled with him, and tried to get his hands around his throat. He really was a small man, much smaller than he had expected, and he couldn't remember why he had been so frightened of him. The knife blade twisted, and Stanley felt it penetrate flesh. A scream cut the night. There was suddenly a warm glow in Stanley's belly, which spread up through his chest. He felt dizzy, and flung his suddenly weightless assailant across the platform, seeing him whirl tiny, tiny away, joining the leaves in their dance, then vanishing back through the turnstile, which clattered again. Blackness loomed overhead like a tidal wave and blotted out the lights of the windows. The dark heaviness knocked Stanley down on to the platform, and he heard a wailing sound, like sirens, or a baby crying. He rested on the platform, which had become as soft as a woman's breast. It was late, he was tired, and the train did not seem to want to come, so he decided to take a well-deserved nap.

The scream of the nurse, who had come in to check Margaret's pulse, but found, when she pulled back the blankets, that her patient had turned into a mass of giant black bats which burst up from the rumpled sheets to fill the bedroom with the fleshy beating of their wings, became the shrill ring of the telephone. Matthew Harmon woke up with a shock, jerked the cord until the phone fell on the bed, and cradled the receiver under his ear.

"Dr. Harmon," the voice on the phone said. A simple, flat statement, as if someone had decided to call in the middle of the night to wake him up and reassure him about his identity. Harmon felt a surge of irritation, and knew he was once again alive. He reached up and turned on the bedside lamp, which cast a pool of light over the bed. He did not look at the other half of the bed, but he could hear Margaret's labored breathing there. She muttered something like "Phone, Matt . . . phone," then choked, as if having a heart seizure. There were no bats, at least.

"Yes?" he said. "What is it?" His throat hurt again, and his voice was husky.

A pause. "I was asked to make this call. Against my better judg-

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ment . . . it's information I don't think you should have. But," a deep sigh, "it seems that we have one of what you call . . . abandoned souls. That is what you call them, isn't it?" Another pause, longer than the first. "This is stupid. I wonder why I called you."

"That makes two of us." The voice on the line was contemptuous, but uncomfortably so, ill at ease despite its advantage of identity and wakefulness. It was a familiar voice, from somewhere in the past, one of so many familiar voices, voices of medical students, interns, residents, nurses, fellow doctors, researchers, all ranged through over forty years of memory, some respectful, some exasperated, some angry. He ran his hand over his scalp and thought about that tone of defensive contempt. "Orphaned. Not abandoned. Though that will do just as well." Given the subject of the call, it had to be someone at an Intensive Care Unit, probably at a city hospital. Possibly connected with a trauma center. That narrowed things . . . got it. "Masterman," he said. "Eugene Colin Masterman. Johns Hopkins Medical School, class of '75. You're at Pres St. Luke's now. I hope that you are finally clear on the difference between afferent and efferent nerves. I remember you had trouble with the distinction, back in my neuroanatomy class at Hopkins. Just remember: SAME, sensory afferent, motor efferent. It's not hard. But, as you said, you didn't decide to call me. Leibig, chief of your ICU, told you to. How is Karl?"

"Dr. Leibig is well," Masterman said sulkily. "Aside from the inevitable effects of age. He has a renal dysfunction, and seems to have developed a vestibular disorder which keeps him off his feet. He will be retiring next year."

"A pity," Harmon said. "A good man. And three years younger than I am, as I'm sure I don't have to remind you. Well, Eugene, why don't you tell me the story?" Masterman, he recalled, hated being called Eugene.

Masterman gave it to him, chapter and verse, in offensively superfluous detail. Patient's name: Paterson, Stanley Andrew. Patient's social security number. Patient's place of employment, a management consulting firm in the Loop. Locations of stab wounds, fractures, lacerations. Patient's blood type and rejection spectrum. Units of blood transfused, in the ambulance, in the Emergency Room, in the ICU, divided into whole blood and plasma. Names of the ambulance crew. Name of admitting doctor. Name of duty nurse. All surname first, then first name and middle initial.

"Who was his first grade teacher?" Harmon said.

"What—Dr. Harmon, I did not want to make this call, understand that. I did so at the specific request of Dr. Leibig."

"Who also wonders if I am crazy. But he did it for old time's sake, bless

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him. Eugene, if, as it seems, you are not enjoying this call, perhaps you should make an effort to be more . . . pithy."

"Paterson suffered a cardiac arrest at, let's see, 1:08 AM. We attempted to restart several times with a defibrillator, but were finally forced to open the chest and apply a pacemaker. We have also attached a ventilator. His condition is now stable."

"Life is not stable," Harmon said, but thought, "The stupid bastards." Would they never learn? Didn't they understand the consequences? *Doctors*. Clever technicians who thought themselves scientists. "Brain waves?"

"Well . . . minimal."

"Minimal, Eugene? Where did he die?"

"He isn't dead. We have him on life support."

"Don't play games with me! Where was he murdered?"

"At the Adams St. El station, at Adams and Wabash. The northbound platform." He paused, then the words spilled out. "Listen, Harmon, you can't go on doing this, talking about ghosts and goblins and all sorts of idiocy about the spirits of the unburied dead. This isn't the Middle Ages, for crissakes. We're doctors, we know better, we've learned. We *know* how things work now. Have you forgotten everything? You can't just let people under your care die to protect their souls. That's crazy, absolute lunacy. I don't know how I let Leibig talk me into this, he knows you're crazy too, and the patient's *not* dead, he's alive, and if I have anything to say about it he'll stay that way, and I won't pull the plug because of some idiotic theory you have about ghosts. And I do so know the difference between afferent and efferent. Afferent nerves—"

"Never mind, Dr. Masterman," Harmon said wearily. "At this hour, I'm not sure I remember myself. Get back to your patients. Thank you for your call." He hung the receiver up gently.

After a moment to gather his strength, he pulled his legs out from under the comforter and forced them down to the cold floor. As they had grown thinner, the hair on them, now white, seemed to have grown thicker. He pulled the silk pajamas down so that he could not see his shins. The virtues of youth, he thought, too often become the sins of age. He had once been slim, and was now skinny. His nose, once aquiline, was a beak, and his high, noble forehead had extended itself clear over the top of his head.

These late night phone calls always made him think of Margaret, as she had been. He remembered her, before their marriage, as a young redhead in a no-nonsense gray suit with a ridiculous floppy bow tie, and later, in one of his shirts, much too long for her and tight in the chest, as she raised her arms in mock dismay at the number of his books she was expected to fit into their tiny apartment, and, finally, as a prema-

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turely old woman gasping her life out in the bed next to him. None of it had been her fault, but it had been she who had suffered.

He dialed the phone. It was answered on the first ring. "Sphinx and Eye of Truth Bookstore, Dexter Warhoff, Owner and Sole Proprietor. We're closed now, really, but we open at—"

"Dexter," Harmon said. "Sorry to bother you. It looks like we have another one."

"Professor!" Dexter said with delight. "No bother at all. I was just playing with some stuff out of the Kabbalah. Kind of fun, but nothing that won't wait. Where is this one? Oh, never mind, let it be a surprise. Usual place, in an hour? I'll call him and get him ready. Oh boy."

Harmon restrained a sigh. He could picture Dexter, plump and bulging in a shirt of plum or burgundy, with his bright blue eyes and greasy hair, behind the front desk at the Sphinx and Eye of Truth Bookstore, where he spent most of his waking hours, of which he apparently had many, scribbling in a paperback copy of *The Prophecies of Nostradamus* with a pencil stub or, as tonight, rearranging Hebrew letters to make anagrams of the Name of God.

The store itself was a neat little place on the Near North Side, with colorful throw pillows on the floor and the scent of jasmine incense in the air. It carried books on every imaginable topic relating to the occult and the supernatural, from Madame Blavatsky to Ancient Astronauts, from Edgar Cayce to the Loch Ness Monster, from Tarot cards to ESP. It had been almost impossible for Harmon to go there, but go there he did, finally, after exhausting every other resource, to accept a cup of camomile tea from Dexter's dirty-fingernailed hands and learn what he reluctantly came to understand to be the truth.

"Yes, Dexter. St. Mary's, as usual."

"Right. See ya."

Harmon hung up. He'd searched and searched, down every avenue, but he was well and truly stuck. When it came to the precise and ticklish business of the exorcism and binding of the spirits of the uneasy dead, there was no better assistant alive than Dexter Warhoff.

A train finally pulled into the station. It was lit up golden from inside, like a lantern. The doors slid open, puffing warm air. Stanley thought about getting up and going into the train. He could get home that way. But he remembered how uncomfortable the seats were on the train, and what a long, cold walk he had from the station to his condo, so he just remained where he was, where the ground was soft and warm. After waiting for a long moment, the train shut its doors and whooshed off, up along the shining metal tracks as they arched into the sky, to vanish

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among the stars and the windows of the apartment buildings, which now floated free in the darkness, like balloons let loose by children.

Once he was alone again, Stanley found himself standing, not knowing how he had come to be so. The wind from Lake Michigan had cleared the sky, and a half moon lit the towers of the city. The city was alive; he could hear the soughing of its breath, the thrumming of its heart, and the murmuration of its countless vessels. Without thinking about it, he swung over the railing and slid down the girders of the El station to the waiting earth. The city spread out before him, Stanley Paterson ambled abroad.

After some time, the wind carried to him the aroma of roasting lamb, with cumin and garlic. He turned into it, like a salmon swimming upstream, and soon stood among the cracked plaster columns and fishing nets of a Greek restaurant. A blue flame burst up in the dimness, and Stanley moved towards it. A waiter in a white sailor's shirt served a man and a woman saganaki, fried kasseri cheese flamed with brandy.

Stanley could taste the tartness of the cheese and the tang of the brandy as they both ate, and feel the crunch of the outside and the yielding softness of the inside. He could taste the wine too, the bitterly resinous heaviness of retsina.

They looked at each other. She was young, wearing a cotton dress with a bold, colorful pattern, and made a face at the taste of the wine. The man, who had ordered it, was older, in gray tweed, and grinned back at her. Stanley hovered over the two of them like a freezing man over a fire. However, as he drew close, something changed between them. They had been friends for a long time, at the law office where they both worked, but this was their first romantic evening together. She had finally made the suggestion, and now, as she looked at him, instead of thoughts of romance, her mind wandered to the coy calculations already becoming old to her, of getting to his apartment, giggling, of excusing herself at just the right moment to insert her diaphragm, of her mock exuberant gesture of tossing her panties over the foot of the bed at the moment he finally succeeded in getting her completely undressed, of how to act innocent while letting him know that she wasn't. The older man's shoulders stiffened, and he wished, too late, that he had resisted her, resisted the urge to turn her from a friend into yet another prematurely sophisticated young woman, wished that he could stop for a moment to think and breathe, in the midst of his headlong pursuit of the Other. The saganaki grew cold as they examined, silently, the plastic grapes that dangled in the arbor above their heads. Stanley moved back, and found himself on the street again.

Music came to him from somewhere far above. He slid up the smooth walls of an apartment building until he reached it. The glass of the

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window pushed against his face like the yielding surface of a soap bubble, and, then, suddenly, he was inside.

A woman with a mass of curly gray hair and an improbably long neck sat at the grand piano, her head cocked at the sheet music as she played, while a younger woman with lustrous black hair and kohl-darkened eyes sat straight-backed on a stool with an oboe. The music, Stanley knew, though he had never heard it before, was Schumann's *Romances for Oboe and Piano,* and they played it with the ease of long mutual familiarity. Their only audience was a fuzzy cat of uncertain breed who sat on a footstool and stared into the fire in the fireplace.

Stanley felt the notes dance through him, and sensed the blissful self-forgetfulness of the musicians. He wanted desperately to share in it, and moved to join them. The oboist suddenly thought about the fact that, no matter how well she played, and how much she practiced, she would never play well enough to perform with the Chicago Symphony, or any orchestra, ever, and the love of her life would always remain a hobby, a pastime. The pianist's throat constricted, and suddenly she feared the complexity of the instrument before her, knowing that she was inadequate to the task, as she was to all tasks of any importance, that no one would ever approve of her, and that she was old. The instruments went completely out of sync, as if the performers were in separate rooms with soundproof walls between them, and the music crashed into cacophony. The cat stood up, bristling, stared right at Stanley, and hissed. The pianist tapped one note over and over with her forefinger. The oboist started to cut another reed, even though she had two already cut. Stanley passed back out through the window.

He left the residential towers and wandered the streets of three-story brownstone apartment buildings. He felt warm, soapy water on his skin, and drifted through the wide crack under an ill-fitting door.

The bathroom was warm and steamy, heated by the glow of a gas burner in one wall. A plump woman in a flower print dress, with short dark hair, washed a child in that most marvelous of bathing devices, a large, freestanding claw-foot bathtub. The little girl in the tub had just had her hair washed, and it was slicked to her head like a mannikin's. She stared intently down into the soapy water like a cat catching fish.

"Point to your mouth, Sally. Your mouth." Sally obediently put her finger in her mouth. "Point to your nose." She put her finger in her nose. "Very good, Sally. Can you point to your ear? Your ear, Sally." After a moment's thought, the little girl put her finger in her ear. "Where is your chin?" Sally, tiring of the game, and having decided which she liked best, stuck her finger back up her nose and stared at her mother. Her mother laughed, delighted at this mutiny. "Silly goose." She poured water over the girl's head. Sally closed her eyes and made a "brrr" noise with

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her lips. "Time to get out, Sally." The little girl stood up, and her mother pulled the plug. Sally waved as the water and soap bubbles swirled down the drain and said, "Ba-*bye*. Ba-*bye*." Her mother pulled her from the tub and wrapped her in a huge towel, in which she vanished completely.

The feel of the terry cloth on his skin, and the warm, strawberry scent of the mother covered Stanley like a benediction. He stretched forward, as the mother rubbed her daughter's hair with the towel until it stood out in all directions. The mother's happiness vanished, and she felt herself trapped, compelled, every moment of her life now given over to the care of a selfish and capricious creature, no time to even think about getting any work done on the one poem she'd been working on since she left high school to get married, her life predetermined now until she grew old and was left alone. She rubbed too vigorously with the towel and Sally, smothered and manipulated by forces she could not control, or even understand, began to shriek. "Quiet, Sally. Quiet, *damn it*."

Stanley remembered the platform. What was he doing in here? He had a train to catch, he had to get home. He could not even imagine how he had managed to stray. He turned and hurried off to the El station.

The two of them walked down the street together, Harmon with a long, measured stride, and Dexter with the peculiar mincing waddle he was compelled to use because of the width of his thighs. Harmon wore a long, thick overcoat and a karakul hat, but the cold still struck deep into his bones. He wore a scarf to protect his throat, which was always the most sensitive. He remembered a time, surely not that long ago, when he had enjoyed the winter, when it had made him feel alive. He and Margaret had spent weekends in Wisconsin, cross-country skiing, and making grotesque snowmen. No longer. Dexter wore a red windbreaker that made him look like a tomato, and a Minnesota Vikings cap with horns on it. As he walked, he juggled little beanbags in an elaborate fountain. He had a number of similar skills—such as rolling a silver dollar across the back of his knuckles, like George Raft, and making origami animals—all of which annoyed Harmon because he had never learned to do things like that. He thought about the image the two of them presented, and snorted, amused at himself for feeling embarrassed.

"Father Toomey looked a little bummed out," Dexter said. "I think we woke him up."

"Dexter, it's three-thirty in the morning. Not everyone sits up all night reading books on the Kabbalah."

"Yeah, I guess. Anyway, he cheered up after we talked about the horoscope reading I'm doing for him. There's a lot of real interesting stuff in it."

"An ordained Catholic priest is having you do his *horoscope?*"

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Dexter looked surprised. "Sure. Why not?"

Why not indeed? Harmon hefted his ancient black leather bag. The instruments it contained had been blessed by Father Toomey, and sprinkled with holy water from the font at St. Mary's. Harmon, in the precisely rigorous theological way that devout atheists have, doubted the efficacy of a blessing from a priest so far sunk in superstition that he had his horoscope done, and performed holy offices for a purpose so blatantly demonic, but he had to admit that it always seemed to do the job. When he handed the sleepy, slightly inebriated priest the speculum, the wand, the silver nails, the censer, the compass, and the rest of the instruments of his new trade, they were nothing but dead metal, but when he took them in his hands after the blessing, they vibrated with suppressed energy. The touch of such half-living things was odious to him, essential though they were. It disturbed him that such things worked. As quickly as he could, he wrapped them in their coverings of virgin lamb hide, inscribed with Latin prayers and Babylonian symbols, and placed them, in correct order, into his bag. That bag had once held his stethoscope, patella reflex hammer, thermometer, hypodermics, laryngoscope, and the rest of his medical instruments, and though he had not touched any of them in years, it had pained him to remove them so that the bag could be used for its new purpose.

"You know, Professor, the other day I was reading an interesting book about the gods of ancient Atlantis—"

"Oh, Dexter," Harmon said irritably. "You don't really believe all these things, do you?"

Dexter grinned at him, yellow-toothed. "Why not? You believe in *ghosts,* don't you?"

Dexter's one unanswerable argument. "I believe in them, Dexter, only because I am forced to, not because I like it. That's the difference between us. It would be terrible to *like* the idea that ghosts exist."

"Boy, did you fight it," Dexter said with a chuckle. "You sat with me for an hour, talking about Mary Baker Eddy. Then you shut up. I asked you what was wrong. 'A ghost,' you said. 'I've got to get rid of a ghost.' Took you three cups of tea to say that. You don't even like camomile tea, do you?"

"It served."

"It sure did. You remember that first time, don't you? I'll never forget it. We hardly knew what we were doing, like two kids playing with dynamite. I had pretended I knew more about it than I did, you know."

"I know." They often talked about the first ghost. They never talked about the second.

"I thought I could handle it, but it almost swallowed me and you had

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to save my ass. Quite a talent you have there. Strongest I've ever heard of. You should be proud."

"I feel precisely as proud as I would if I discovered that I had an innate genius for chicken stealing."

Dexter laughed, head thrown back. He had a lot of fillings in his back teeth. "Gee, that's pretty funny. But anyway, this Kabbalah stuff is real interesting. . . ."

Harmon suffered himself to be subjected to a rambling, overly-detailed lecture on medieval Jewish mysticism, until, much too soon, they were at the El station.

Dexter craned his head back and looked up at the dark girders of the station, his face suddenly serious. "I feel him up there. He's a heavy one. Strong. He didn't live enough, when he had the chance. Those are always the worst. Too many trapped desires. Good luck to you. Oh . . . wait. They lock these things when the trains stop running, and we're not exactly authorized." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a little black pouch, which, when opened, revealed a line of shiny lock-picking tools.

"I used to pick locks at school," Dexter said. "Just for fun. I never stole anything. Figuring out the locks was the good part. Schools don't have very good locks. Most students just break in the windows." He walked up to the heavy metal mesh door at the base of the stairs, and had it opened about as quickly as he could have with a key. He sighed, disappointed. "The CTA doesn't either. I don't even know why they bother. Well, now it's time. Good luck." They paused and he shook Harmon's hand, as he always did, with a simple solemnity.

Nothing to say, Harmon turned and started up towards the El station.

They *were* always the worst. "The people who want to live forever are always the ones who can't find anything to do on a rainy Sunday afternoon," as Dr. Kaltenbrunner, the head of Radiology at Mt. Tabor Hospital, had once said. Dr. K was never bored, and certainly never boring, enjoyed seventeenth-century English poetry, and died of an aneurism three months before Harmon encountered his first ghost. Died and stayed dead. Harmon always thought he could have used his help. Thomas Browne and John Donne would have understood ghosts better than Harmon could, which was funny, because there hadn't *been* enough ghosts in the seventeenth century to be worth worrying about.

Some doctors managed to stay away from ER duty, and it was mostly the young ones—who needed to be taught, by having their noses rubbed in it, about the mixture of fragility and resilience that is the human body—who took the duty there, particularly at night. In his time, Harmon had seen a seventy-year-old lady some anonymous madman had pushed

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in front of an onrushing El train recover and live, with only a limp in her left leg to show for it, and a DePaul University linebacker DOA from a fractured skull caused by a fall in the shower in the men's locker room.

As Harmon climbed the clattering metal stairs up to the deserted El platform, he remembered the first one. It was always that way with him. He was never able to see the Duomo of Florence without remembering the first time he and Margaret had seen it, from the window of their pensione. There were some words he could not read without remembering the classroom in which he learned them, and whether it had been sunny that day. It meant there were some things he never lost, that he always had Margaret with him in Florence. And it meant that he could never deal with a ghost without remembering the terror of the first one.

He had been working night duty, late, when they brought in a bloody stretcher. It had been quiet for about an hour, in that strange irregular rhythm that Emergency Rooms have, crowded most of the time, but sometimes almost empty. A pedestrian had been hit by a truck while crossing the street. There was a lot of bleeding, mostly internal, and a torn lung filled with blood, a hemothorax. His breathing was audible, a slow dragging gurgle, the sound a straw makes sucking at the bottom of a glass of Coke when the glass is almost empty. Harmon managed to stop much of the bleeding, but by that time the man was in shock. Then the heart went into ventricular fibrillation. Harmon put the paddles on and defibrillated it. When the heart stopped altogether, he put the patient on a pacemaker and an external ventilator. The autopsy subsequently showed substantial damage to the brainstem, as well as complete kidney failure. Every measure Harmon took, as it turned out, was useless, but he managed to keep the patient alive an extra hour, before everything stopped at once, in the ICU.

A day or so later, the nurse on duty came to him with a problem. Rosemary was a redhead, cute, and reminded him of Margaret when she was young, so he was a little fonder of her than he should have been, particularly since Margaret had been sick. The nurse wasn't flirting now, however. She was frightened. She kept hearing someone drinking out of a straw, she said, in a corner of the ER, only there wasn't anyone there. She was afraid she was losing her mind, which can happen to you after too many gunshot wounds, suicides, and drug overdoses. Harmon told her, in what he told himself was a fatherly way, that it was probably something like air in the pipes, which he called an "embolism," a medical usage which delighted her. She teased him about it.

Harmon remembered being vaguely pleased about that, while he searched around and listened. He didn't hear anything. It was late, and he finally climbed up on a gurney and went to sleep, as some of the other doctors did when things weren't busy. He'd never done it before, and why

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he did it was something he could not remember, though everything about the incident, from the freckles around Rosemary's nose to the scheduling roster for that night's medical staff, was abnormally clear in his mind, the way memories of things that happened only yesterday never were. When he woke up, he heard it. A slow dragging gurgle. He listened with his eyes closed, heart pounding. Then it stopped.

"Hey, have you seen my car?" a voice said. "It's a blue car, a Cutlass, though I guess it's too dark here to see the color. I know I parked it near here, but I just can't find it."

Harmon slowly opened his eyes. Standing in front of him was a fat man in a business suit, holding a briefcase. He wasn't bloody, and his face was not pasty white, but Harmon recognized him. It was the man who had died the night before.

"Look, I have to get home to Berwyn. My wife will be going nuts. She expected me home hours ago. Have you seen the damn car? It's a Cutlass, blue. Not a good car, God knows, and it needs work, but I gotta get home."

Harmon had met the wife, when she identified the body. She had, indeed, expected him hours ago.

"Jeez, I don't know what I could have done with it."

Harmon was a logical man, and a practical man, and he hadn't until that moment realized that those two characteristics could be in conflict. What he saw before him was indubitably a ghost, and as a practical man he had to accept that. He also knew, as a logical man, that ghosts did not, indeed could not, exist. This neat conundrum, however, did not occur to him until somewhat later, because the next time the dead man said, "Do you think you could help me find my car? I gotta get home." he launched himself from the gurney, smashing it back into the wall, bolted from the ER, and did not stop running until he was sitting at the desk in his little office on the fifth floor, shaking desperately and trying not to scream.

The El platform was windswept and utterly empty. Harmon walked slowly across its torn asphalt until he came to the spot where it had happened. The police had cleaned up the blood, and erased the chalk outline, that curious symbol of the vanished soul used by police photographers as a record of the body, so morning commuters would not be unpleasantly surprised by the cold official evidence of violent death. He didn't have to see it. He could feel it, like standing in the autopsy room and knowing that someone had left the door to the cold room where the bodies were kept open because you could feel the cold formaldehyde-and-decay scented air seeping along the floor.

He didn't know why he had this particular sense, or ability, or whatever. To himself he compared it to someone with perfect pitch and rhythm

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who nevertheless dislikes music, someone who could play Bach's *Goldberg Variations* through perfectly after hearing the piece only once, and yet hate every single note. It was a vicious curse. He set his black bag down, opened it, and began to remove his instruments.

To start, Harmon had, cautiously, cautiously, sounded out his colleagues on the subject of ghosts. He'd read too many books where seemingly reasonable men lost all of their social graces when confronted by the inexplicable and started jabbering and making ridiculous accusations, frightening and embarrassing their friends. So, in a theoretical manner, he asked about ghosts. To his surprise, instead of being suspicious, people either calmly said they didn't believe in them, or, the majority, had one or more anecdotes about things like the ghost of a child in an old house dropping a ball down the stairs or a hitchhiking girl in a white dress who would only appear to men driving alone and then would vanish from the car. Others had stories about candles being snuffed out in perfectly still rooms, or dreams about dying relatives, or any number of irrelevant mystical experiences. No one, when pressed, would admit to having actually seen anything like a real, demonstrably dead man walking and talking and looking for a blue Cutlass. A man who persisted, week after week, in trying to get Harmon to help him find the damn thing. Harmon transferred from the ER. Rosemary thought it was something personal, because she'd asked him to her house for dinner, and they rarely spoke after that.

He told Margaret, however, as much of it as he could. It gave her something to think about, as she lay there in bed and gasped, waiting for the end. She wondered, of course, if the strain of her illness had not made her husband lose what few marbles he had left, as she put it, but she only said this because both of them knew Harmon was coolly sane. It interested her that some people could hear ghosts, but that Harmon could see them and talk to them. She, like Dexter, used the word "gift."

In good scholar's style, Harmon did research, in the dusty, abandoned stacks of the witchcraft and folklore sections of Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois, Circle Campus. He even had a friend let him into the private collections of the Field Museum of Natural History. He learned about lemures, the Roman spirits of the dead, about the hauntings of abandoned pavilions by sardonic Chinese ghosts, and about the Amityville Horror. It was all just . . . literature. Stories. Tales to tell at midnight. Not a single one of them had the ring of truth to it, and Harmon was by this time intimately familiar with the true behavior of ghosts.

Everyone was very good to him about Margaret, and about what he did to himself as a result, though no one understood the real reason for it. It got to be too much, in the apartment, in the hospital, and he finally

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started to say things that concerned people. They didn't think he was crazy, just "under stress," that ubiquitous modern disease, which excuses almost anything. Then, someone at the Field Museum mentioned, with the air of an ordinarily respectable man selling someone some particularly vile pornography, that Dexter Warhoff, of the Sphinx and Eye of Truth Bookstore, might have some materials not available in the museum collection. It was rumored that Dexter possessed a bizarrely variant scroll of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead,* as well as several Mayan codexes not collected in the *Popul Vuh* or the *Dresden Codex,* though no one was quite sure. Harmon had come to the conclusion that using ordinary reason in his new circumstances was using Occam's Razor while shaving in a fun house mirror. Common sense was a normally useful instrument turned dangerous in the wrong situation. So he went to Dexter's store, drank his sour tea, and talked with him. Dexter scratched his head with elaborate thoughtfulness, then took Harmon upstairs, where he lived, to a mess with a kitchen full of dirty dishes, and brought him into a room piled with newspaper clippings, elaborately color coded, in five different languages, as well as sheets of articles transcribed from newspapers in forty languages more.

"You poor guy," Dexter said sadly. "That's a terrible way to find out about what's hidden. I can see that it was terrible. But I must say, I've been wondering about a few things. You've got the key there, I think, with this life support stuff. Look at this." He showed Harmon a French translation of a photocopied Russian *samizdat* document from the Crimea. It described ghosts haunting a medical center at an exclusive Yalta sanatorium. The tone was slightly metaphorical, but, for the first time, Harmon read things that confirmed his own experience. Dexter showed him an article from the house newspaper of a medical center in Bombay, an excerpt from the unpublished reminiscences of a surgeon in Denmark, and a study of night terrors in senile dementia cases in a Yorkshire nursing home, from *Lancet.* The accounts were similar. "There's almost nothing before the 1930s, very few up to about 1960, and a fair number from the 70s and 80s."

"Life support," Harmon said, when he was done reading. "Artificial life support is responsible."

"Now, Professor, let's not jump to conclusions. . . ." But Harmon could see that Dexter agreed with him and, for some strange reason, that pleased him.

"When the body is kept alive by artificial means, for however long, when it should be dead and starting to rot, the soul, which normally is swept away somewhere—heaven, hell, oblivion, the Elysian Fields, it doesn't matter—is held back in this world, tied to its still-breathing body. And, being held back, it falls in love with life again." Harmon found

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himself saying it again, alone on the platform. It had seemed immediately obvious to him, though it was not really an "explanation" of the sort a scientist would require. It was, however, more than sufficient for a doctor of medicine, whose standards are different. A doctor only cares about what works, without much attention to why.

None of his colleagues had understood, though. He had gotten a little cranky on the subject, ultimately, he had to admit that, but he felt like someone in the eighteenth century campaigning against blood letting. He had always known that doctors were, by and large, merely skilled fools, so he quickly stopped, but not before acquiring a certain reputation.

He drew his chalk circle on the rough surface of the platform, using the brass compass. Using a knife with a triangular blade, he scraped some material from within the circle. No matter how well the police had cleaned, it would contain some substance, most likely the membranes of red blood cells, that had belonged to the dead man. He melted beeswax over a small alcohol lamp whose flame kept going out, then mixed in the scraped up blood. He dropped a linen wick into a mold of cold worked bronze and poured the wax in. While he waited for the candle to harden, he arranged the speculum, the silver nails, and the brass hammer so that he could reach them quickly. It was strange that most of the techniques they used had their roots in earlier centuries, when ghosts were the extremely rare results of accidental comas or overdoses of toxic drugs. People had had more time then to worry about such things, and some of their methods were surprisingly effective, though Dexter and Harmon had refined them. He set the candle in the center of the circle, lit it, and called Stanley Paterson's name.

The train still had not come. What was wrong? Why had there been no notification by the CTA? Stanley stood on the platform and shivered, wondering why he had wandered away, and why he had come back. Where was the damn train? Beneath his feet he could see a circle of chalk, and a half-melted candle, but he didn't think about them. Had he daydreamed right past the train, with those thoughts of musicians and mothers? Had the trains stopped for the night?

There was a rumble, and lights appeared down the tracks. They blinded him, for he had been long in darkness, and he stumbled forward with his eyes shut. He felt around for a seat. It seemed like he'd been waiting forever.

"It's a cold night, isn't it, Stanley?" a man's voice said, close by.

"Wha—?" Stanley jerked his head around and examined the brightly lit train car. It was empty. Then he saw that the man was sitting next to him, a tall old man with sad brown eyes. He was wearing a furry hat. "What are you talking about? How do you know my name?" Not waiting

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for an answer, he turned and pressed his nose against the glass of the window. A form lay there on the platform, sprawled on its back. It wore a long black overcoat. A large pool of blood, black in the lights of the station, had gathered near it, looking like the mouth of a pit.

"Stanley," the man said, his voice patient. "You have to understand a few things. I don't suppose it's strictly necessary, but it makes me feel less . . . cruel."

The train pulled into the next station. Out on the platform lay a dead man with a black coat. Three white-clad men burst onto the platform and ran towards it with a stretcher. The train pulled out of the station. "I don't care how you feel," Stanley said.

The man snorted. "I deserve that, I suppose. But you must understand, the dead cannot mix with the living. It just cannot be. We had a dead man in our Emergency Room once. He wouldn't go away. He tried to be part of everything. A ward birthday party turned gloomy because he tried to join it, and the patient whose birthday it was sickened and died within the week. He tried to participate in the close professional friendship of a pair of nurses, built up over long years of night duty and family pain, and they had fights, serious fights, and stopped ever speaking to each other. The gardener, whose joy in his plants he tried to share, grew to hate the roses he took care of, and in the spring they bloomed late and sickly. I've always liked roses. Life is hell with ghosts around, Stanley. Believe me, I know all about it." He had put the roses last, he noticed, as if they were more important than people. How much like a doctor he still was. . . .

Stanley watched as the white-clad men strapped the man in the black coat into the stretcher and rushed off, one of them holding an IV bottle over his head. The train pulled out of the station. "I—you don't understand, you don't understand at all." Stanley found himself shaken with sobs. How could he explain? As a child he'd wanted to play a musical instrument, like his sister, who played the piano, or even Frank, his next door neighbor, who played the trumpet in the school band. He'd tried the piano, the saxophone, the cello. None had lasted longer than two years, and he never practiced, despite his mother's entreaties. As an adult he'd tried the recorder, the guitar, and failed again. Yet, this very night, he'd felt what it was like to play Schumann on a piano and an oboe, and feel the music growing out of the intersection of spirit and instrument. He'd felt what it was like to be alive. "I know what to *do* now, don't you see. I realize what I was doing wrong, how I was wasting everything. Now I know!"

"So now, at last, you know." The man shook his head sadly, and held a flat, polished bronze mirror in front of Stanley's face. Stanley looked into the speculum, but saw nothing but roiled darkness, like an endless

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hole to nowhere. He felt weak. "Lie down, Mr. Paterson," Harmon said softly. "You don't look at all well. You should lie down."

Somehow they had come to be standing on the same damn platform again, as if the train had gone absolutely nowhere at all. The unnatural blankness of the mirror had indeed made him feel dizzy, so Stanley lay down. The platform was hard and cold on his back now. Nothing made sense anymore. He watched the stars spin overhead. Or was it just the lights of the apartment buildings?

"You can't leave me here," he said. "Not just when I've figured it out."

"Shut up," Harmon said, savagely. "It's too late." He drove a long silver nail into Stanley's right wrist. Stanley felt it go in, cold, but it didn't hurt. "You're dead." He drove another nail through Stanley's foot, tinking on the head with a little hammer. "That first one, in the ER. He almost killed *us,* he was so strong. But we bound him, finally, once we'd figured out what to do. If I went back there now, I would hear him, talking to himself, as if he'd just woken up from a nap and was still sleepy. I hear you everywhere, where I have bound you, on street corners, in hallways, in alleys. In beds." Harmon found himself crying, tears wetting his cheeks, as if he were the one Stanley Paterson was supposed to be feeling sorry for. Stanley Paterson, who would have only the understanding that he was dead, not alive, to keep him for all eternity. "Don't worry, Stanley. Life is hateful."

"No!" Stanley cried. "I want to live!" He reached up with his free hand and grabbed Harmon by the throat.

Harmon felt like he was being buried alive, but not buried in clean earth. He was being buried, instead, in the churned-over, corrupted earth of an ancient cemetery, full of human teeth and writhing worms. It pushed, damp and greasy, against his face. The smell was unbearable. Darkness swelled before him, and he almost let go.

The darkness drained away, and the platform reappeared. Dexter stood over him, his tongue sticking out slightly between his lips. He held the speculum over Stanley's face, forcing him back. Dexter's clothes flapped, and he leaned forward, as if into a heavy, foul wind. "Quick, Professor," he choked. "He's a strong one, like I said." Harmon tapped the fourth nail into Stanley's left wrist.

"I want to live!" Stanley said, quieter now.

Harmon said nothing. Dexter held the fifth nail for him, and he drove it through Stanley's chest. "There. Now you will remain still." He rested back on his heels, breathing heavily. How like a doctor, he thought. He could eliminate the symptom, but not cure the disease. Those ghosts, no longer disturbing the living, would lie where he had nailed them until Judgment Day. And there was nothing he could do to help them. He sat there for a long time, until he felt Dexter's hand on his shoulder. He

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looked up into that kindly, ugly face, then back at the platform, where five silver dots glittered in the overhead lights.

"That was a bad one, Professor."

"They're all bad."

"It's worse if they never lived before they died. They want it then, all the more." Dexter packed the instruments away. Then he rubbed the tension out of Harmon's back, taking the feel of death up into himself. Dexter, with his credulous beliefs in anything and everything, absurd in his Minnesota Vikings cap with the horns. Without him, Harmon could not have kept moving for even a day.

Harmon thought about going home. Margaret would be there, as she always was, on the side of the bed where the blankets were flat and undisturbed. He hadn't acted in time, when she had her final, fatal heart attack. He had waited, and doubted his own conclusions, and let them put her on life support for three days, in the cardiac ICU, before he decided it was hopeless, and let them pull the plug on her. By then, of course, it had been much too late. He should simply have let her die there, next to him. But how could he have done that? Whenever he changed the sheets, he could see the rounded heads of the five silver nails driven into the mattress, to keep her fixed where she died.

She had loved life, but she had wanted to stay with him . . . always. So he had laid down on the bed with her and felt her cold embrace. For a doctor with a good knowledge of anatomy his suicide attempt had been shockingly bad. Slitting your own throat is rarely successful. It's too imprecise. They had found him, and healed him, reconstructing his throat. Modern medicine could do miracles. When he was well enough, though still bandaged, he went and found Dexter. They took care of the man in the ER, and then Margaret. She had cried and pleaded when the nails went in. But she had loved life, so it wasn't as hard as it could have been, though Harmon could not imagine how it could have been any harder.

When he came back, she would ask him, sleepily, how it had gone. She always sounded like she was about to fall asleep, but she never did. She never would.

"Let's go," Dexter said. "It'll be good, to get back to bed. I gotta open the store in three hours. Jeez."

"Yes, Dexter," Harmon said. "It will be good to get to bed." ●

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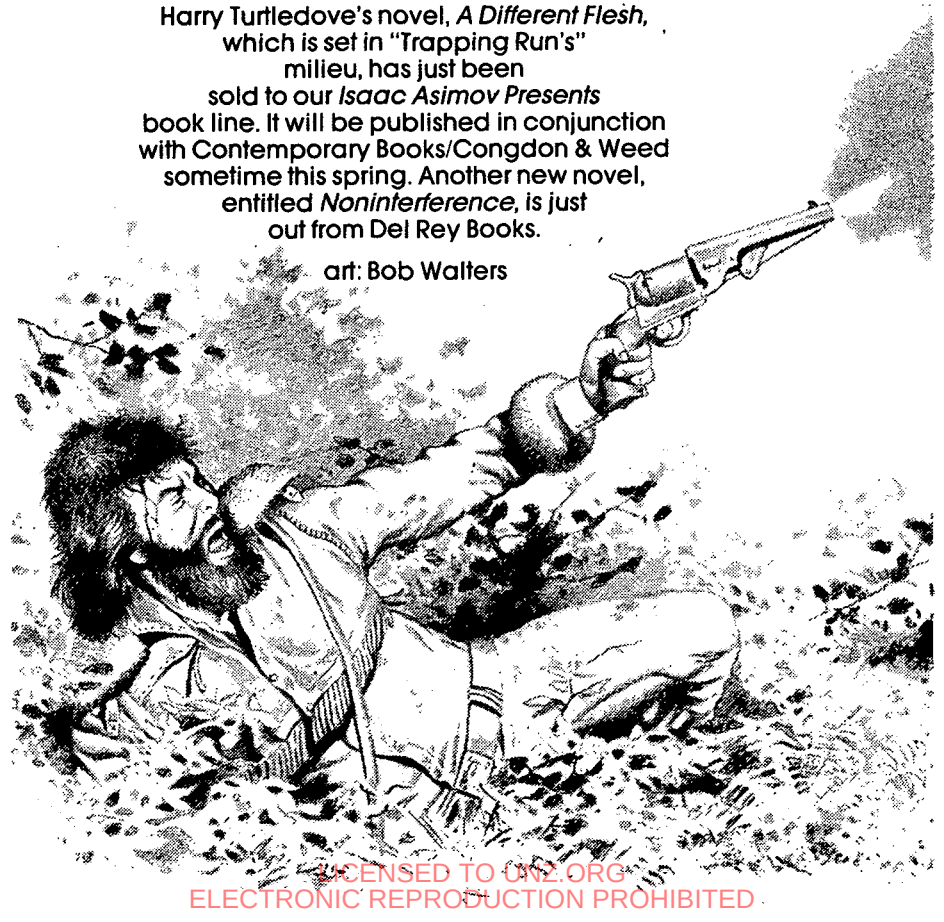
TRAPPING RUN

by Harry Turtledove

Harry Turtledove's novel, *A Different Flesh*, which is set in "Trapping Run's" milieu, has just been sold to our *Isaac Asimov Presents* book line. It will be published in conjunction with Contemporary Books/Congdon & Weed sometime this spring. Another new novel, entitled *Noninterference*, is just out from Del Rey Books.

art: Bob Walters



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Silent as drifting smoke, the sim stepped into the forest clearing where Henry Quick made his camp. The sim's hairy hand grasped a steel knife; its arms were bloody to the elbows.

Something—perhaps the first hint of its strong odor cutting through the damp sweetness of the air in the clearing—told Quick of its presence. He turned. He was a dark, stocky man whose deliberate motions belied his name.

"Sit by the fire," he said, though he knew his words were wasted. It did not matter. As he spoke, his fingers moved in the hand-talk even the wild sims here beyond the Rockies used these days. Their mouths could not shape men's speech, but hand-talk let them convey far more complex ideas than did their native hoots and grunts and cries.

As the sim hunkered down beside him, Quick shook his head, surprised he had spoken at all. When he was out on a trapping run, he seldom talked, even to himself, and when he did he was as apt to use signs as words.

He shrugged. Nothing wrong with talking, if he felt like it. As if to prove the point to himself, he spoke out loud again: "What do you have there for me?" Once more, his fingers echoed his words; not enough men yet crossed the mountains for the sims hereabouts to have learned to understand, if not to speak, English.

The sim grinned, displaying broad yellow teeth. *Good fur*, it signed. Its gestures were less crisp than Quick's, not as fully realized; in their transmission through who knew how many bands of sims, the signs had grown sketchy, attenuated. But Quick followed its meaning, as a city man will grasp his country cousin's rude dialect. And, of course, the marten fur the sim held out spoke for itself.

Good fur, Quick agreed after examining it. The sim had done a neat, careful job of case-skinning, cutting from the center of the hind claws up the hind legs, across the anus and belly, and down the forelegs. The soft, plushy pelt had no extra knife holes in it to lower its value. Either the sim had caught the marten in a snare of its own devising or, much more likely, had brought it down with a well-flung stone.

Under their beetling brow ridges, the sim's eyes grew intent. *You give how much?* it signed.

Quick considered. *You*—he repeated the sign to make it apply to the whole band, not just the sim in front of him—*have flint, steel.*

Have, the sim echoed. Along with signs, fire-making tools had spread to the wild sims. When men came to North America more than two centuries ago, the native subhumans had known how to use fire and keep it alive, but not how to start it if ever it went out. If weaker than men's, their wits were not dull enough to miss the advantage of that.

Want hatchet? Quick asked.

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Show. The sim's wide, hairy face remained impassive, but its member rose to betray its eagerness. *Get their peckers up and you got a deal* was an adage everyone who traded with sims knew.

Quick rose, ambled over to his pack, took out three hatchets. *Pick*, he offered. All three were heavier, both in head and handle, than he would have cared to use himself. Sims, though, were stronger than men, and did not care for tools as men did. Clumsy ones suited them fine.

The sim hefted all three, chose one, swung it through the air, and let out a hoot of delight. The sim went over to a sapling, chopped it down with a few hard swings. Then it checked the edge of the hatchet head with its thumb. It hooted again. *Still sharp, no chips*, it signed. *Good*. In spite of its metal knife, it was still used to the chipped stones sims made for themselves.

Good, Henry Quick agreed. He had paid fifty sesters for the hatchet back in Cairo; the marten fur would be worth easily twenty times as much. Some people in the cities of the Federated Commonwealths called that robbery. Quick did not see it that way. Back on the other side of the mountains, hatchets were easy to come by, marten furs much less so. The situation was reversed here. Accounts balanced.

Back in the cities of the Commonwealth, too, Quick would have had to put up with the stink of coal smoke, with railroad noise, and with the endless presence of people. He had little use for pointless chatter. Maybe that was one reason he got on well with sims: they lacked the brains to talk when they did not have something to say.

Some trappers, Quick knew, treated sims like wolves or foxes or any other vermin, and hunted them savagely. Sims robbed traps, no doubt of that. They were hungry all the time, and meat already caught was easy meat. Quick was sure the sim in the clearing with him had eaten the marten's carcass as soon as the pelt was off it.

In a way, Quick followed the reasoning of the trappers who went after sims. Because of their hands and wits, sims made devilish thieves. But those same hands and wits made them dangerous enemies. By the nature of things, trappers traveled alone or in small groups. The ones who came down hardest on sims often never returned.

Quick had always felt that making them into allies worked better. His initial expense was greater because of the trade goods he bought before every journey, but he thought he got more furs by enlisting the sims' aid than by harassing them. He found a trap robbed every now and again, yes, but against that were more cases like this one, sims doing his hunting for him.

The subhuman flourished the hatchet again, making the air sigh. *Good*, it signed, and left the clearing with no more farewell than that. Henry Quick was not offended; he had scant use for ceremony himself.

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He stretched the skin, fur side in, on a piece of wood, and set it aside to dry. He did not have many marten pelts back at his base camp, which made him doubly glad for this one.

He also thought he would have to be a lot hungrier than he was, to want to eat marten meat.

He walked the trap line to check the snares he had set within a couple of miles of the clearing. Blazes he had cut on trees at eye level guided him from one trap to the next. As far as he knew, sims had not figured out what blazes were for. He had several sets of traps within the territory this band wandered, each grouped around a clearing. He tried to make a complete circuit every couple of weeks or so, to make sure none of the beasts he caught decomposed enough to harm their pelts.

His nose guided him to the first trap. He shook his head in annoyance. The trap must have taken a victim almost as soon as he reset it the last time through. He was doubly annoyed when he found the metal jaws holding only a striped ground squirrel, whose skin would have been worthless even if fresh. Doubly disgusted, he threw the little corpse away, set the trap again, stuck on a fresh suet bait, and went on to the next one.

Something, probably a bird but maybe a sim, had stolen the bait from that trap without springing it. Quick sighed and replaced it. The bait on the trap after that was still intact. Quick sighed again; he'd have to think about moving it.

When he neared the next trap, he heard a wild, desperate thrashing. He drew his pistol and sidled forward, soft leather boots sliding soundlessly over dirt and grass, leaves and twigs. Catching a sim in the act of robbing a trap would be tricky; finding one caught might be worse, for that could turn the whole band against him.

His breath hissed out in relief as he saw the trap held only a fox. The animal must have been fighting the spiked iron teeth for some time. It was nearly exhausted, and lay panting as Quick approached. His mouth tightened. This was the part of his job he tried not to think about; taking a dead animal from a trap was much easier than dealing with a live one there.

No help for it, he thought. On his belt by his pistol he carried a stout bludgeon for times such as this. He set the gun down, drew it out. The fox's yellow eyes stared unblinkingly at him. Next to the torment in its trapped and broken leg, he was as nothing. He brought down the bludgeon, once, twice. The fox writhed and twitched for a few minutes, then sighed, almost in relief, and lay still.

He sat not far from the body, waiting for it to cool and the fleas and other pests to leave it. Then he pried apart the jaws of the trap, rolled the fox onto its back, and began to skin it. He always took pains at that,

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and took extra ones today, with the memory of the marten fur still fresh—he did not want any sim's work to outdo his.

So intent was he that he had almost finished before he realized he was not alone. A sim stood a few paces away, intently watching him. It was a female, he saw with some surprise—unlike the males, they did not usually stray far from the clearing where a band was staying. He kept away from that clearing. Of all his traps, this one was probably closest to it, but it was still a good mile away.

Female sims, Henry Quick thought, were not so brutal-looking as males. Their features were not as heavy, and the bony ridges above their eyes were less pronounced. That did not mean the sim would have made an attractive woman. It lacked both forehead and chin, and short reddish hair covered more of its face than Quick's brown beard concealed of his own.

The sim, like all sims, wore no clothes, but, like all sims, was hairy enough not to need them. Even its breasts were covered with hair, though the pinkish-brown nipples at their tips were exposed. It had an unwashed reek like that of the one that had traded Quick the marten pelt.

Take skin? it signed. That, at any rate, was what Quick thought it meant. He had trouble being sure; it could not use its fingers well because its hands were full of roots and grubs, and its gestures were blurry in any case.

Yes, he answered.

He must have understood correctly, for its next question was, *Why club, not noise-stick?* It pointed at his pistol.

Not want hole in skin, he signed.

It rubbed its long jaw as it considered that, then grunted, exactly like a man who got an unexpected answer that was still satisfying.

As if putting a hand to its face had reminded it of the food it carried, it popped a grub into its mouth, chewed noisily, and swallowed. Like most wild sims, it was on the lean side. Quick glanced down at the fox carcass. To him, it was so much carrion. Not to sims. *Want meat?* he asked.

Me? It pointed to itself, brown eyes wide with surprise. Male sims hunted, females gathered; probably, Quick thought, this one had never taken anything bigger than a mouse or ground squirrel. But it did not need much time to decide. *Want meat*, it signed firmly, leaving off the gesture that turned the phrase into a question.

Quick handed the fox's body to the sim. It gave a low hoot as it stared at the unaccustomed burden it held. It turned to leave, then looked back at the trapper, as if it expected him to take back the bounty he had given. *Keep. Go*, he signed. It hooted again and slipped away.

Henry Quick went in a different direction, off to check his next trap.

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As he walked, he chuckled quietly to himself. There would likely be consternation among the sims tonight, especially if the males had had a luckless day at the chase.

The trapper paused for a moment, frowning. He did not want his gift to land the female sim in trouble. Among humans, that might happen if a woman stepped into men's territory. With sims, on reflection, he did not think it would. Being less clever than men, they lacked much of the human capacity for jealousy. Their harsh lives also made them relentless pragmatists. Meat would be meat, no matter where it came from.

Quick found a rabbit in his last trap. It was freshly dead. He skinned it, cleaned it, and brought it back to the clearing.

His pack of trade goods was undisturbed. Had he been one of the trappers who habitually maltreated sims, he would not have dared leave it behind . . . but then, had he been one of that sort, he would not have dared travel alone in this land where men had not yet settled.

He started his fire again, spitted the rabbit on a stick, and held it over the little blaze. The savory smell the lean meat gave off made his nostrils twitch and his mouth grow suddenly wet. He smiled, wondering what roast fox smelled like.

When he woke the next morning, he rolled up his blanket and went over to wash in a creek that ran near the clearing. The water was bitter cold; he shivered all the way back to his campfire, and stood gratefully in front of it until he was dry. No wonder sims did not bathe, he thought as he dressed. And this was still August, with the days hot and muggy. In another month, though, snow could start falling among the peaks of the Rockies, the ultimate source of his little stream. He would have to think about heading back to inhabited country soon, unless he wanted to spend a long, cold winter living with the sims.

"Not bloody likely," he said out loud. No trapper had a lot of use for his fellow humans, but Quick ached to spend a couple of days with good bouncy company in a bordello. He was bored with his hand.

His next set of traps surrounded a clearing a few miles northwest of the one where he was. The way was blazed, and to guide him if he got lost he had a sketch map and a list of landmarks he had made when he first scouted this territory. Except for the ones he had given them, none of the places hereabouts had names. No other man, so far as he knew, had seen them.

The behavior of the local sims certainly argued for that. They had neither fled from him on his first appearance nor attacked him on sight. Having no hostile memories to overcome made establishing himself much easier than it would have been otherwise.

As if thinking of the sims had conjured them up, Quick heard a crashing in the undergrowth off to one side of him and the hoarse, excited cries

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of several males. They must have been chasing something big, most likely a deer. They were tireless trackers, and more skilled even than an outdoorsman like Henry Quick. They had no guns with which to kill at a distance, but had to rely on thrown stones and spears either tipped with fire-hardened wood or made from a knife gained in trade lashed to the end of a sapling.

The sims' voices rose in a chorus of triumph. They would eat well tonight, and for the next couple of days. Quick's stomach rumbled. He was not so sure of a good meal himself. When he got to the clearing that formed the center for his next set of traps, he set down his pack and went out to do some hunting of his own.

He came back near sunset, seething with frustration beneath the calm shell he cultivated. The sims had had more luck than he. He was carrying a squirrel by the tail, but there wasn't much meat on a squirrel. He made a fire, coated the squirrel with wet clay, and set it among the flames to bake.

When he thought it was done, he nudged it out of the fire with a stick and began breaking the now-hard clay with the hilt of his dagger. The squirrel's fur and skin came away with the clay, leaving behind sweet, tender meat ready to eat.

Quick, unfortunately, also remained quite ready to eat after the squirrel was gone. Along with his trade goods, he still had about ten pounds of dried, smoked buffalo meat in his pack. He worried every time he decided to gnaw on a strip—he might need it later. He was only a little hungry now, he told himself severely. He turned his back on the pack, avoiding temptation.

A noise in the darkness beyond the edge of the clearing sent ice darting up his back and made him forget his belly. He grabbed for his rifle, peering out to see what sort of beast was prowling round his camp. Light came back red from wolves' eyes, green from those of a spearfang. Even with the gun in his hand, he shivered at the thought of confronting one of the great cats at night.

Try as he would, he saw nothing. A moment later, he realized why. A male sim stepped into the flickering circle of light his campfire threw—like men's, sims' eyes did not reflect the light that reached them.

The male came toward him slowly, deliberately. He saw it was the one that had brought him the marten fur. It carried its knife in one hand, the hatchet he had traded it in the other. Neither weapon was raised, and the sim showed no hostility. Still, Quick stayed wary. No sim had ever visited him at night before.

He did not set aside his rifle until the sim put down what it carried. Even then he had misgivings. Sims were stronger than people; if this one chose to grapple with him, he was in trouble.

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But it had only freed its hands so it could use signs. *You give food*, it signed, amplifying, *Meat. You give to female.*

Yes, Quick agreed. *I not eat fox, not want to*—He hesitated. Hand-talk had no way to express *waste*; the concept was alien to a sim's mind. —*put aside*, he finished lamely.

Why not eat fox? Meat good, the sim signed, and the trapper's tight nerves finally eased a bit. Still, the male's next question took him by surprise: *Hungry now?*

Yes, he signed again, with a rueful glance in the direction he had thrown the squirrel's small bones.

Then he was surprised all over again, for the sim signed, *You come with me to our fire, eat there.*

Go there? he asked, not quite believing he had seen correctly. He had always made a point of staying away from the clearing the sims used as their own. That was partly what he would have called politeness with men, but sprang more from the simple desire not to draw unwelcome attention to himself. Well, he seemed to have drawn attention, but not of the unwelcome sort.

Come to our fire, the sim repeated. Although almost every wild band owned flint and steel now, fire and the memory of the time when they had not been able to make it still loomed large in sims' lives. *Fire* meant to this male what *home* would have to Henry Quick.

I come, he signed, stepping toward the sim.

It picked up its weapons, signed, *Follow*, and plunged into the woods. Quick followed as best he could. Again he was reminded how wild sims perforce became masters of forest craft. The male glided along so quietly that he felt slow and clumsy by comparison; sometimes only its lingering odor let him stay close to it. He suspected it could have gone faster had it not been leading him.

Blinking on in front of his nose, a firefly made him jump. Other than that, the forest was impenetrably dark. The sim pressed on with perfect confidence.

Just when Quick was beginning to wonder if anything lay behind that confidence, he scented woodsmoke on the breeze. The sim must also have caught the smell, for it said "Hoo!"—a breathy, throaty noise, the first sound it had made all night—and hurried ahead. A moment later, Quick smelled charring meat along with the smoke. He hurried too, and soon saw light ahead.

The male hooted before it entered the clearing where its band was staying. Answering calls came back to it. They made Henry Quick think of shouts heard on the breeze, with the words blown away but the sense—here, welcome—remaining.

Quiet fell as the trapper stepped into the open area. With the male

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sims, it was a measuring sort of silence. Quick had encountered most of the dozen or so of them as they and he hunted; he had traded tools for furs with more than half of them. Meeting them as a group, though, emphasized the differences between him and them as solitary contacts could not.

The females and youngsters, on the other hand, had never seen him before, except for the one to whom he'd given the fox carcass. Their stillness was more than a little fearful. But they were curious too. A child (for the life of him, Quick could find no better word, especially since young sims, like females, had a more human semblance than did grown males) of perhaps seven came up to him. It touched his suede trousers and tunic, then looked up at him, the picture of puzzlement. *Strange skin*, it signed.

A couple of males growled warningly and one hefted a stone as Quick stretched out his arm. All he did, though, was roll up the fringed sleeve of his tunic to show what lay beneath. *No hair*, he signed. That was not strictly true, but by sim standards he might as well have been bald. *Put on animal skins instead—warm.*

The youngster felt the trapper's bare skin, jerked its hand away with a grimace. *Hair better*, it signed.

Startled, Quick burst out laughing. The sims laughed too, loud and long. The male that had been holding a stone threw it on the ground, came over to Quick, and hugged him hard enough to make his ribs creak. He wished he could have taken more credit for winning acceptance, but was glad to get it no matter how it came.

The male that had brought him tugged him toward the fire. *Eat*, it signed, and the trapper needed no further invitation.

One leg still remained from the carcass of a buck—likely, Quick thought, the one he had heard the males chasing. The rest was bones, the big ones split to get out the marrow and the skull crushed for the sake of the brains.

A grizzled male had charge of the meat. As Henry Quick came over, the sim picked up a chipped stone and began to carve off a chunk for him. He started to offer his own steel knife instead, but stopped when he saw the stone tool gliding through the leg of venison. A steel knife lasted almost forever, was easy to hone again and again, and did not chip. None of that, however, meant stone could not be sharp.

Quick's eyes widened slightly at the size of the piece the old sim gave him. *Too much*, he signed. *Not eat all.*

The sim shrugged and grunted. *Someone*, it answered. Someone will if you don't, Quick thought it meant. Even the single gesture had been hesitant. The trapper wondered when hand-talk had reached this band. Maybe it was so recently that the old sim had already been grown, and

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only learned it imperfectly, as a man will have trouble speaking a foreign language he acquires after his youth.

Watching the meat bubble and brown as he held it on a stick over the fire drove such speculation from his mind. Beside him, the sim that had brought him here was roasting an even larger piece. Less patient with cooking than he, it jerked its gobbet away from the flames, tossed it from hand to hand until it was cool enough to eat, then tore off one great bite after another. The venison disappeared with astonishing haste.

Quick sat beside the sim and tried valiantly to match its pace, but its bigger teeth and bigger appetite meant he was outclassed. Since they starved so much of the time, sims made the most of good days like this one. The trapper was groaningly full by the time half his piece was gone, yet by then the male had almost finished its, and showed no signs of slowing down.

He was thinking of offering it what was left of his venison when another sim touched him on the knee. He turned round to see the female he had met the day before. The female held out its left hand in a begging gesture, signing, *Meat?* with the right.

He cut off a piece and gave it to the sim. Two youngsters were begging from the male next to him. It gave them some scraps. A little one that could hardly toddle came up to one of the children with its hand out, and in turn received a few tiny fragments of meat. It stared at the trapper as it ate.

The male turned to Quick. *More*, it signed, getting up and walking over to pluck a handful of whortleberries off a pile of branches heavy with the large, purple-blue fruit. The trapper ate a few himself; their tart sweetness cut through the greasy film coating the inside of his mouth.

Both males and females freely took the berries; no begging was involved. Only dearly won meat required that. Though they usually shared their prey, the males who hunted had some prior claim on it. With a burst of pride that made him feel foolish a moment later, Quick realized the female sim had treated him as if he were a hunter himself, a dominant member of the band.

Despite that acceptance, he remained an object of curiosity. That, he knew, was natural enough—he was probably the first *live* creature ever to share the band's campsite. If they changed their minds about him, he might not stay that way, either. Sims sometimes ate sims from other bands and, when they could catch them, men too. A good many such grisly episodes punctuated men's westward expansion across America.

But this group only found him interesting. The grizzled elder that tended the meat ran its hands over his clothes, as fascinated by the soft

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suede as the youngster had been. *Make,* it signed, and then, after obvious painful groping for the sign, *How?*

Skins cut to arms, legs, chest. Not stink—rub tree bark—not any tree, right tree. As a trapper, he knew how to tan hides; what he could not do was put it in terms the sim understood. *Show one day,* he promised. If a sim saw something done, it could copy as well as a man. But sims would not improve on a process, as men might.

Show, the old sim agreed. It pointed to Quick's fancy silver belt buckle. *Show?*

Regretfully, he shook his head. He knew nothing of metalworking, save that it was too complex for the subhumans to fathom.

His person fascinated the sims as much as his gear. They pointed at his gray eyes, then at their own, which were uniformly dark. He had to roll up his sleeve several times, and take off his boots to show that under them his feet were like theirs, if less battered and callused. His forehead, though, intrigued the sims most. They kept patting at it to compare it to their own heads, which sloped sharply back from their brow ridges instead of rising.

He shuddered at the idea of eking out a living with so few resources to use to challenge nature. He shuddered even more when he thought of doing so through the winters hereabouts. On the face of it, it seemed impossible. The female to whom he had given the fox carcass was close by. He signed, *How live, when snow come?*

Bad, the sim signed, repeating for emphasis. *Hard. Cold. Hungry. Many die in cold.* A shiver illustrated the idea. Far more fluent with her signs than the elder had been, the female went on, *Dens like bear's—brush, branches. Still cold. Make fire. Still cold. Cold. Cold. Cold.* The sim's eyes widened with dread. Winter was a worse enemy than spearfang or bear.

With their bellies full, though, the sims, never reflective in the first place, did not care to look ahead. The youngsters ran through the clearing, wrestled with one another, and pestered their elders, for all the world like so many unruly children back in Cairo or Portsmouth or Philadelphia. Some of the adults made beds of branches and leaves, curled up, and went to sleep, ignoring the youngters' squawks and shouts. A mother nursed a baby. The old sim and a young adult male squatted by the fire, chipping stones. The young adult absently swatted at a youngster that disturbed them. When it came back to watch what they were doing, the male let it stay.

Other adults had a different idea for passing the time. Three or four couples paired off and mated. The rest of the sims paid them no particular attention, nor did they seem to feel the lack of privacy. When a running youngster was about to crash into one pair, the male reached out from its position on its knees behind the female to fend off the little one.

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Henry Quick found the rutting sims no more interesting than did the rest of the band. He had been away from women a long time, but not long enough to think of a sim as a partner. He would as soon have coupled with a pack mare.

Some trappers, he knew, did that. Some mated with sims, too. He knew what he thought of them: the same as most people thought. "You son of a sim" would start a fight anywhere in the Commonwealths.

Thus he was taken by surprise when the female sim to whom he had given the fox meat touched him on the leg again, this time much higher up than before. *Want—?* the female signed. The last gesture it used was not a standard part of hand-talk, but not easy to get wrong, either.

To remove any possible misunderstanding, the female crouched on hands and knees, looking back over its shoulder at him. Neither that nor the sight of its cleft between hairy and rather boyish buttocks did anything to rouse his ardor.

No, he signed; hand-talk was not made for tact. He softened his refusal as much as he could: *You, I not same.*

The sim, luckily, seemed more curious than angry. *Not fit?* it asked, eyeing his crotch as if to gauge what his trousers concealed. He left that unanswered. He had seen enough sims to know their masculinity was hardly so rampant as jokes and stories made it out to be, but he was no more than average that way himself.

Not want—? the female signed after a moment, and used that gesture of its own invention again.

Full, Quick temporized. He patted his stomach.

Apparently that impeded performance among sims too, because the female gave a small, regretful hoot. *Later?* it signed.

The trapper shrugged and spread his hands. *You, I not same*, he repeated. The female shrugged too, and went off to get a few more whortleberries. To Henry Quick's relief, it did not come back to him. He'd meant to imply that men and sims were so different no offspring could come from a mating. He did not know whether the sim was bright enough to follow that. He did know it was a lie.

He had never seen a crossbreed. The repugnance almost everyone felt for coupling with the subhumans had a lot to do with that: few of mixed blood were born. Fewer still lived. The human parents in the matings usually made sure of that, to save themselves from disgrace. The ones that did survive were good for driving lawyers to distraction, and for a host of tales whose truth the trapper was in no position to judge.

He yawned. Back by his own campfire, he would have been asleep hours ago. Here he had neither his own blanket nor the nests sims made for themselves. He stretched out on the ground. The big blaze the sims had going was plenty to keep him warm. He was tired enough not to

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worry about sleeping soft. He rolled over, threw aside a twig that was poking his cheek, and knew nothing more till the sun rose.

He woke with a crick in his neck and a bladder full to bursting. He walked into the bushes at the edge of the clearing to relieve himself. By the smell, and by the way his boots squelched once or twice on the short journey, the sims were not so fastidious.

They had already begun their endless daily round of foraging. Henry Quick was glad to see that the importunate female was gone from the campsite. Otherwise, he thought with wry amusement, it might have wanted to go into the bushes with him to see just what sort of apparatus he had.

The males, who hunted in a group rather than scattering one by one, were still by the fire. The trapper went up to the one that had guided him here. *Good food*, he signed.

He had a spare bootlace in one of the pouches that hung from his belt. He dug it out. Yes, it was long enough for him to cut a couple of lengths from the end and still do what he wanted with it. He cut off the extra pieces, tied them to the main length at one end and made loops at the other end of each. Then he tied the makeshift belt round the sim's middle.

Carry knife, axe, he signed. *Have them to use. No need not have hands free.* The sim did not seem to understand. It rubbed its chinless jaw, staring at Quick, but made no move to put the tools in the loops.

The old grizzled male looked from the trapper's belt to the leather lace he had given the other sim. Its eyes lit. It let out a soft hiss of wonder; Quick remembered making that very same noise when, as a boy, he had seen his first steam railroad engine.

The grizzled sim stepped forward, took the knife from the younger male's hand, and thrust it through one loop. Then it pointed, first at the hatchet, then at the second loop. It gave an imperative barking call, pointed again. It might never have learned hand-talk well, Henry Quick thought, but its years had given it a wisdom of its own.

After it repeated its gestures a third time, the younger sim finally got the idea. It pushed the hatchet handle into the vacant loop; the head kept the hatchet from falling through. The sim looked at its empty hands, at the tools it still had with it. Suddenly it grinned an enormous grin. *Good*, it signed at Quick. *Good. Good. Good.*

Have more? another male asked. *Make?*

No more. Henry Quick apologetically spread his hands. He suggested, *Make from plants, from skins—*

The old sim could follow hand-talk, no matter how much trouble it had using the gestures. *Make*, it signed, and pointed to itself. Before long, Quick suspected, every sim in the band, or at least every hunting male, would be sporting a belt. Some would be made of vines and break, others

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of green hides that would stink and get hard and wear out quickly. They would be better than no belts at all, he supposed.

He was pleased to have found something to give in exchange for the feast of the night before. Sims had so little that he was surprised they had offered to share, in spite of his earlier gift. Now they were less likely to resent him for accepting.

In daylight, the journey back to his trap line took less than half as long as it had by night. When he returned to the clearing where his latest camp was, he checked his pack. No sims had been near it, though they never would have had a better chance to steal. On the other hand, he thought, smiling, they'd had plenty just as good.

He went the round of the traps near the clearing, reset the ones that needed it, and dealt with the couple of furs he had taken. He should have had one more; a trap still held the bloody hind leg of a ringtail. That was all that was left of the black-masked beast, though. When he first saw the tracks around the trap, he thought the sims had robbed him after all. Then he noticed the clawmarks in front of the toes. A bear had taken the chance to seize prey that could not flee.

He swore, but resignedly; that sort of thing had happened to him many times before, and would again. Bears could be as big a nuisance as sims. Some bands of sims, like the one in whose territory he was now, could be made to see that working with him got them more than robbing him did. The only thing a bear understood was a bullet.

A grouse boomed, somewhere off among the spruce. Henry Quick forgot about the fear, at least with the front part of his mind. He sidled toward the noise. The grouse's dull brown feathers concealed it on its perch, but not well enough. He got almost close enough to knock it down with a club before he shot it.

He bled and gutted the bird, handling the gall bladder with care so it would not break and spill its noxious contents into the body cavity. He wished he were back at his base camp; the grouse would be better eating after hanging for several days. But he was on the move, and had no time for such refinements. The dark, rich meat would be plenty good enough tonight.

So it proved, though he roasted it a couple of minutes too long; grouse was best rare. He would have liked to flavor it with some bacon instead of crumbs from his salt beef, but the rashers he'd brought were long gone; he'd eaten them as soon as they began to go rancid.

Picking his teeth with the point of his knife, he laughed at himself. All this fretting about fancy cooking was a sure sign he'd been in the wilderness too long. That night he dreamt of eating pastry full of fruit and cream until he had to cut a new notch in his belt, in its own way as

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sensual a dream as his more usual imaginings of sweet-scented girls reaching up to him from featherbeds thick enough to smother in.

Waking hungry to a blanket in the middle of a forest clearing was hard. Even eating what was left of the grouse did not help much, though it would have been an expensive luxury if ordered in a cafe east of the mountains. Too much of what he did involved things that were expensive luxuries east of the mountains. What he craved were the luxuries he could *only* get back there.

The intensity of that craving ended up undoing him. The next clearing around which he had a set of traps was over on the west side of the one the sims used. The trail he had blazed to it swung a lot farther north than it had to, so he could give the sims' clearing a wide berth. Now that the subhumans had shown how friendly they were, he decided to take the direct route. If he did that the rest of the time he was there, he thought, he could save several days' travel and set out for the fleshpots of the east that much sooner. The sims, he told himself, would not mind.

Nor did they. He happened on a party of hunting males not long after he set out. Several saw him, and nodded his way as they might have to one of their own band. But he had not reckoned on the bear.

For all his woodscraft, the first he knew of it was when it loomed up on its hind legs like some ancient, brooding god, not fifty feet from him. In that moment he had a good shot at its chest and belly, but he held his fire. Bears, even silvered bears like this one, rarely attacked without being provoked.

But it did not do to count on a bear, either. This one peered his way. He was close enough to see its nostrils flare as it took his scent. It gave an oddly piglike grunt, dropped to all fours, and barreled toward him.

He threw his rifle to his shoulder, fired, and ran. The bear screamed. He heard its thunderous stride falter. But it still came on, roaring its pain to the world and crashing through bushes and furs like a runaway railroad engine. And in a sprint a bear, even a wounded bear, is faster than a man.

Henry Quick wished he had time to reload. Back in Plymouth Commonwealth, he had heard before he set out on this trapping run, they had most of the kinks out of a repeating rifle. He would have given five years' worth of furs to have one now. He threw away the gun he did have so he could run faster. If he lived, he'd come back for it.

He never remembered feeling the blow that shattered his right leg. All he knew at the time was that, instead of sprinting in one direction, he was suddenly spinning and rolling through the undergrowth in a very different one. That saved his life. The bear had to change directions too, and it was also hurt.

In the second or two its hobbling charge gave him, he jerked out his

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pistol, cocked it, and squeezed the trigger. He seemed to have forever to shoot. His hand was steady, with the eerie steadiness the shock of a bad injury can bring. The bear's mouth gaped in a horrible snarl; the pistol ball shattered a fang before burying itself in the beast's brain. The bear sighed and fell over, dead.

"God, that was close," the trapper said in a calm, conversational voice. He started to pull himself to his feet—and the instant he tried to put any weight on his leg, all the pain his nervous system had denied till then flooded over him. He fainted before he could shriek.

The sun had moved a fair distance across the sky when he came back to himself. The moment he did, he wished he could escape to unconsciousness again. He tasted blood, and realized he had bitten his lip. He had not noticed. That pain was a trickle, set against the all-consuming torrent in his leg.

Tears were streaming down his face by the time he managed to sit up; the world had threatened to gray out several times in the process. His trouser leg was wet too, not only from where he'd pissed himself while unconscious but also farther down, where the bear had struck him. Blood was soaking through the suede.

He held himself steady with one hand in a thornbush while he walked the other down his leg to the injury. Something hard and sharp was pressing against the inside of his trousers. He groaned, this time not just from the pain. With a compound fracture—and heaven only knew how much other damage in there—he would soon be as dead as if the bear had killed him cleanly. He wished it had—this way hurt worse.

His hands shook so badly that he took a quarter of an hour to reload his pistol. A lead ball would end his misery no less than the bear's. But after the weapon was ready, he did not raise it to his head. If he had been able to charge it with powder and wadding and bullet, how could pain's grip on him be absolute?

He began to drag himself toward the bear. That took longer than loading the gun had, though the body was only a handful of paces from him: he passed out several times on the way. At last he reached the carcass. If he was going to try to live, he would need to eat. The bear was food, for as long as it stayed fresh.

The pistol ball left no visible wound, now that the bear's mouth was closed in death. Quick's first shot, with the rifle, had torn along the left side of the beast's neck and lodged in its shoulder. It might have been a mortal wound, but not quickly enough to have done the trapper any good.

He tried to push the point of his broken shinbone back into his flesh, and failed repeatedly: the pain was too much to stand. He did drag himself to a sapling close by the bear's carcass and cut it down with his knife.

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Then, using the lace from his left boot, he tied the sapling to his leg. It was not much of a splint, but a little better than nothing; with it on, the broken pieces did not grind together quite so agonizingly.

He set out to make a fire, against the coming chill of night and the chill of his damaged body and for cooking a bloody gobbet he had worried off the bear's shoulder. He was still crumbling dry leaves for tinder when the hunting party of male sims came upon him.

He did not realize they were there until they were almost on top of him. Along with their crude weapons, they carried squirrels and rabbits, a snake, and a couple of birds: not a great day's bag by any means. They looked in wonder from Henry Quick to the bear and back again. *You kill?* one asked. After a little while, he recognized it as the male that had brought him the marten fur.

Understanding its hand-talk and responding took all the concentration and strength the trapper had. *I kill bear*, he answered. *Bear hurt me—break leg bone.*

The sims grimaced. One gave an involuntary hiss of pain. Another pointed at the rude splint. *Why stick?*

Hold bone pieces still—hurt less. Quick changed the subject; his leg did not hurt much less. He waved at the dead bear. *Cut up meat—take to your fire.* He could not hope to eat a twentieth part of it before it spoiled.

The sims could have done what they wanted with the bear no matter what he said, but his free giving of it seemed to take them aback. *Come with us, eat with us again?* signed the male he knew.

He had prayed it would ask that. The band of sims, he knew, was his only hope of living through the winter, though he had scorned the thought not long before. It was his only hope of living longer than a few days, come to that. Even if his leg healed well, he would not be able to travel for months. And with the injury he had, he had a bad feeling it would not heal well.

A male with a broken front tooth was signing at the one he knew best: *Kill*, it urged. *More meat.*

Kill, another male agreed. *No hunt, no walk. Lie by fire, eat. Cold soon. No food to give. No good to us. Kill.*

In other circumstances, Quick might have agreed with those sims. He would be a burden for the band, and one more mouth to feed when they went hungry themselves. Unless he could find a way to make himself valuable to them, he was done for. *Take me to fire, then take all tools in pack*, he offered.

One of the sims, unfortunately, was smart enough to see the flaw in that. *Kill, then take tools*, it signed.

He almost gave up then. As with a bullet, a spear going into his chest or a club breaking his head would put him out of his pain. But he had

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not shot himself, and he did not want to end as a feast for subhumans. He forced his battered wits to work. *Take me to fire, make more tools.* That was the best he could do. If it did not appeal to the sims, he was dinner.

The male that had brought him the marten pelt hooted. *Make noise sticks?* it asked. He could see the eagerness on its broad features.

No, he signed, hating to have to do it—but even had he had metal to hand, he did not know how to make a gun. *Use noise stick to kill game near fire.*

He happened to think of bows and arrows. They were rare in the Commonwealths, but some rich men back east liked to hunt with them, claiming they were more sporting than guns. Quick cared nothing for sport. He was interested in surviving. *Make thing like noise stick, but quiet,* he signed.

Kill far like noise stick? the male asked.

Not that far. Farther than spear.

The sims shouted at one another, not so much arguing as trying to intimidate. Finally the male that had brought Quick the marten fur signed, *Take,* and pointed to him. He tried without much luck to stifle a shriek as two sims hauled him upright. Others fell to butchering the bear. Soon they were toting slabs of meat bigger than than those a man could easily carry.

That strength also helped the pair over whose shoulders Quick had draped his arms. All the same, the journey to the band's clearing was a nightmare. It would have been dreadful even with careful men hauling the trapper. It was worse with sims. They were not deliberately cruel, but they were careless. Several times his broken leg hit the ground so hard he thought it would fall off. He rather wished it would. Mercifully, he passed out again before the hunting party got home.

The anguish when his bearers let him down like a sack of meal brought him back to himself. Sims were all he could see as he peered blearily upward. Their thick odor clogged his nostrils.

He felt blood flowing down his leg again. The thought of getting the sims to set the broken bone made him sweat cold, but leaving it untended was worse. *Take off stick,* he signed. *Take off boots, pants.* The sims grunted in puzzlement; the hand-talk gesture for trousers meant nothing to them, since they had never seen any except his. He pointed at his pair, and they understood. *Fix bone, put stick back on, put another stick on, hold bone in place.* He thought of something else. *Hold me down. I yell, you do anyhow.*

The sims hooted in dismay when they saw how he was hurt. *He die,* a female signed flatly.

He live, he make for us, answered the male he knew.

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He live. That was another female. After a moment, he recognized it as the one that had wanted to couple with him. Well, no danger of that now, he thought, and even in his torment almost laughed.

The grizzled sim pushed forward. *Make?* it signed. *Good. Live.* That was the most sign-talk the trapper had ever seen from it.

He turned his head away. The sight of his red-smeared white tibia sticking through his flesh was making him even sicker than he felt already. *Push bone into leg*, he signed. *Make straight, like other leg.*

Till then, he had only thought he knew what pain was. Again, the sims were not cruel on purpose; again, that did not help. No one could have set the fracture without badly hurting him. That the would-be healers were inexperienced subhumans made things worse, but perhaps not by much.

Some unmeasureable time later, his agony lessened, if only by a tiny fraction. He chose to believe that was because the two pieces of bone were properly aligned. If not, he knew he could bear no more. His throat was raw from screaming; he could feel the blood slick on his hands, where his nails had bitten into his palms.

Tie sticks on, he signed. *Tie tight. Hold bones in place.* His senses failed him before the sims were done. This time they did not return to him at once.

When at last he woke again, the sun was in his eyes. It was in the wrong part of the sky. It was, he realized, the next morning. His leg felt dreadful, which was a marvelous improvement on how it had felt the day before.

He looked around. Most of the sims were long gone from the clearing, the males to hunt, the females to forage. Youngsters ran around. A couple of aging females kept an eye on them, as did the grizzled male. It chipped at stones, stuck the ends of saplings into the fire so they would make stronger spearpoints.

The female that had wanted him came out of the woods. Its arms were full of berries and roots; it carried a small dead snake in its left hand. When it saw he was conscious, it set down its prizes and came over to stoop beside him. After a moment it rose again, to return with a chunk of charred bear meat. *Eat*, it signed.

His stomach twisted. He was not ready for food, but he had a raging thirst. *Water*, he signed. His trousers still lay beside him. He took his canteen off his undone belt. A little water, none too fresh, sloshed in it. He drained the canteen, held it out to the female sim. *Fill*, he signed, and then discovered he had to explain how—the idea had never occurred to the sim.

It hurried away, returning quickly: the stream was not far away. The chill, sparkling water flowing down Quick's throat was one of the most

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delicious things he had ever felt. He gave the female the canteen for a refill; he felt warm, though the day was still early.

He saw a thick branch, not far from the fire, and a hatchet lying on the ground close to it—the sims knew nothing of rust. The grizzled sim was watching him with interest. *Chop*, he signed to it, indicating with his hands a length of about eight inches.

It eagerly picked up the hatchet, and fell to work with a will. When it was done, it handed him the piece of wood. *Make?* it signed, more curiosity on its face than he expected to find in a subhuman.

He began hollowing out the branch with his dagger. The work took most of the day. It was interrupted when he had to move his bowels. He could do nothing but lie in his own filth. After a while, an old female, wrinkling its broad, flat nose, got a handful of leaves and carried the dropping away. He hoped the sim would clean him too, but it did not. Sighing, he went back to his carving.

When the rude cup was done, he explained with signs what it was good for. The grizzled male took some time to understand. When at last it did, it hurried off to test the marvel for itself. It came back with a wide grin on its face. Standing where he could see it, it held the cup over its head and poured water into its mouth from arm's length. It got wet, but it did not seem to care.

The female that had wanted him returned from another foraging trip. It handed him another piece of cold cooked bear meat. *Eat*, it signed again. This time he felt ready to try. The flesh tasted like beef, but was greasier. His stomach, long empty, churned uneasily.

His bowels moved again not long after that. The young female dealt with the mess in the same way the old one had before. It came back, though, with more leaves, and did a rough job of wiping him.

Thanks, he signed. It only grunted; the gesture meant nothing to it. Back in the settled parts of the Commonwealths, where sims served men, polite phrases had come into hand-talk. They had not, however, become part of the rough, abridged version this band used. Quick shook his head, sorry he could not express the gratitude he felt.

The last thing he remembered when he fell asleep that night was seeing the grizzled sim hard at work on another cup. The one he had made was in front of it. Every so often it would pick his up and study it, as if to remind itself what it was doing.

The trapper woke before sunrise, shivering. He had thought of the pain in his leg as a fire before; now it was hot in the most literal sense. He put a hand to his forehead. Fever, he thought. It was the last coherent thought he had for a long time.

He never knew how long he lay in delirium; the hours and days stretched and twisted like taffy. Every once in a while, something would

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lodge in his memory. He recalled a young sim bending over to peer down at him, its solemn face so close to his that it filled his field of vision. A mite was crawling across its cheek. The mite seemed more interesting to him than the little sim.

He remembered telling the male that had brought him the marten fur how to get coffee stains out of linen. He went into great detail, though the sim knew nothing of either coffee or linen and understood not a word of English. Using hand-talk never occurred to him. After a while, the sim went away. Quick kept on talking until his mind clouded again.

He remembered being fed two or three times, all of them by the female that had wanted him. The first time, he choked on a piece of meat and had to struggle to spit it out. After that, the sim gave him only soft, pasty food. He watched it chewing meat and fruit before passing them on to him, as if he were a just-weaned infant. He knew he should have been disgusted, but lacked the strength. He did not spit out the food, either.

He heard deep, racking coughing, and marveled that his lungs and throat were not worn raw. Only gradually, over a couple of days, did he realize he was not the one coughing. A little after that, the noise stopped, or he stopped noticing it; he did not figure out which until much later.

He remembered the female shaking him back into foggy awareness of the world around him. It held a plant in front of his face, a plant with downy, gray-green leaves, each cut into blunt lobes and teeth. The flower-heads held many small, tubular pinkish-white flowers. They were sere and brown now, well past their peak. Dusty maiden, the plant was called—one of the thousands of little nondescript shrubs that grew in the woods.

He laughed foolishly; he was a good way past his peak too, he thought. "Not quite ready for flowers, though," he said out loud. The sense of the words brought him closer to real consciousness. He was not far from being ready for flowers, and knew it.

The female held the root against his lips. *Eat*, it signed over and over until he opened his mouth. It thrust the root in. He gagged, bit down. Dirt crunched between his teeth. So did the root. It tasted horrid. When he tried to spit it out, the female sim held a hand over his mouth and would not let him. It kept signing, *Eat*. With no other choice, he did. Tears of rage and weakness filled his eyes.

The next thing he remembered was thinking it had started to rain. But when he opened his eyes, the sun was shining. Yet he was wet. Sweat covered every inch of his body. It dripped from his nose and trickled through his beard and matted hair. He put a hand to his forehead. It was cooler. His fever had broken. He drifted away again, but into some-

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thing closer to natural sleep than to the oblivion in which he had wandered before.

When he woke again, the female sim was trying to feed him another plant like the last one, but even more bedraggled. This time, the sim broke off the root and forced it into his mouth. The taste was just as bad as he remembered but, gagging, he got the thing down. After he had swallowed, the female brought him a cup of water and held his head while he drank it. He did not think the cup was the one he had made.

He had another sweating spell during his next sleep, and stayed awake some little while when he came out of it. The female sim seemed to have taken over his nursing. It greeted him with yet another dusty maiden plant. He no longer tried to fight its ministrations. Enough of his wits were back for him to realize that, however acrid and revolting the roots it was giving him tasted, they were doing him good.

He came awake again at dawn, thinking how hungry he was. He tried to raise himself up on an elbow. The effort left him gasping before he finally succeeded. But no matter how weak he was, he was at last in command of his faculties once more.

He took stock of himself, looking down the length of his body. He whistled, soft and low. "No wonder I'm hungry," he said out loud; his voice was a rusty croak. The fever had melted the flesh from his bones. Every rib was plainly visible (he had no idea when the sims had taken off his tunic), and his legs were bird-scrawny.

The splints, he saw with relief, were still on his right calf. It ached fiercely, but now the pain was at a level he could bear. Yellow serum oozed from the scab where the bone had stabbed through his skin, yet his right leg felt not much warmer than the other one. Despite the splints, the leg had a kink in it that had not been there before.

He did not care. He was healing. A limp—even a cane the rest of his life—would be a small price to pay. He marveled that he was alive at all.

Because the agony in his leg had diminished, he was able to take stock of his other bodily shortcomings, which were considerable. He felt raw, running sores on his back and buttocks, not surprising when he had been lying there so long. There were more on the insides of his thighs, from imperfectly cleaned wastes. But he was not lying in a great, stinking pool of his own filth. The sims must have dragged him from spot to spot in their clearing. He had no memory of it.

Most of the subhumans were already out looking for food. One of the old females that kept an eye on the youngsters while their parents foraged walked in front of him. *Food*, he signed.

The old female gave back a pace. "Hoo!" it said in surprise; he must have been an inert lump so long that the sims no longer expected any-

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thing else from him. The old female brought him some berries. They were the unripe and overripe ones none of the subhumans had wanted. Again, Henry Quick did not care. Half-starved as he was, they tasted wonderful.

He tried to roll on his side, but even splinted, even beginning to mend, his leg would not let him. His bedsores—he could think of no better name for them—snarled as his weight came back down on them. He was not going anywhere, even so short a distance, for a while yet. He abandoned the slender dream he'd let grow again of getting back across the mountains before the snow fell.

The female sim that had been caring for him returned, bearing what looked like a chunk of log. The old female gave an excited hoot, pointed to Quick. Seeing him conscious, the other sim dropped its burden and dashed over to him. It had also been carrying another dusty maiden plant.

This time he took the plant from the sim's hand and ate it before he could be told to. Whatever was in that root was better medicine than most of the ones the doctors back in Cairo had. When he had choked it down, he signed, *Eat?*

Eat, the female sim echoed, grinning hugely. One of the hatchets from Quick's pack was lying close by. The sim struck the log it had brought in. Punk flew; the log was old. Two or three more strokes served to split it. It was full of big, fat beetle larvae. They squirmed in the dirt. Youngsters came running up to pop them into their mouths.

The female sim skewered several grubs on a twig, held them over the fire, and brought them to Quick. The trapper gulped, then sighed. If he was going to live with sims, he would have to live like a sim, and that was that. He screwed his eyes shut, but he ate. Perhaps hunger seasoned the grubs, for he did not find them as disgusting as he expected. Compared to the medicinal root, they were delicious.

The female sim fetched him a cup of water. He wondered how many times it had done that while his wits wandered. Few human nurses would have been so patient.

The water made his bladder fill up. He did not want to piss himself, not now when he was awake. He called to the female sim. When he had its attention, he signed, *Fill cup with piss from me? Not piss on ground here.*

"Hoo," the sim said softly, as the subhumans often did when meeting an idea they had not thought of. The sim held a cup between his legs. It took hold of his penis to put the tip inside the cup as matter-of-factly as if it were handling his toe. Urinating without fouling himself was another of the pleasures that accompanied healing.

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He thought of something. *Not drink from this cup*, he signed. *This cup—piss only.*

"Hoo," the female said again.

For all his improvement, the trapper still slept as much as a young child. He was asleep when the hunting party of males returned, a little before sunset. When he woke the next morning, most of them were gone again. The male that had brought him the marten pelt, however, crouched beside him, plainly waiting for him to rouse.

That waiting was as far as politeness went among sims. They had no small talk. As soon as the male saw Quick's eyes on it, it signed, *Make thing like noise stick.*

Quick frowned. He had hoped the sim had forgotten the promise he'd made as he thrashed on the ground in anguish. He had only the vaguest idea of how to make a bow, to say nothing of arrows. Unfortunately, the sim remembered. He would have to learn.

If it was going to propel its arrow, a bow had to be of springy wood. The trapper pointed to one of the spruces at the edge of the clearing. *Fetch me little tree like that*, he signed. He held his hands about four feet apart. The sim went into the woods. It soon came back with a sapling such as he had described. A knife lay close enough for him to reach it. He began cutting branches off the trunk. The sim watched for a while, then decided nothing was going to happen right away. It picked up its hatchet and a stout club and went off to hunt.

Because Quick was stuck on his back, trimming the sapling was a slow, awkward job. He managed to twist enough to prop himself up on his left elbow. He used his left hand to hold the fragrant trunk and carved away with his right, but things still did not go well. He looked round for the grizzled sim. The old male could help, and would probably be interested in what he was up to.

He did not see the old male. Thinking back, he had not seen it since his wits came back. When the female that cared for him returned from a foraging trip, he asked about it. *Dead*, the female signed, a thumbs-down gesture old as the Roman arena. The sim amplified it with a racking burst of coughs. Reminded, Quick recalled the paroxysms he had heard in his delirium.

Once more he was frustrated because he could not make the polite expressions of sympathy he could have with speech. After some thought, he signed, *Bad for band.*

Bad for band, the female agreed. *Tool-maker.* All sims could use and make tools, of course, but as with men some were better than others. The grizzled sim had lived long enough to gain a great deal of experience, too. If it had not passed on all it knew, the band would indeed suffer.

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Henry Quick wondered how much he could help there. What hurt the band would also hurt him.

By the end of the day, he had the trunk of the spruce bare of branches and a notch carved in either end. *Good help*, he signed to the female. It smiled back at him. He realized he had to make a conscious effort to smell it these days, probably, he thought, because by now his own odor was as strong as its.

About then the males came back. They were smeared with blood but triumphant; they carried a plump doe already cut in pieces. The females and youngsters greeted them with glad cries. The band would feast tonight.

The male that had brought Quick the marten fur ambled over and picked up the would-be bow. It scowled, eyebrows working on the heavy brow ridges. *Not like noise stick*, it signed ominously. Had it had a sign for *fake*, it would have used it.

Not like, the trapper admitted, adding, *Do like, when done*. The sim grunted, a noise redolent of skepticism. Quick's eye fell on the hind leg from which another male was carving chunks. He had intended to use another bootlace as a bowstring, but he only had two, and the sims would need more bows than that . . . assuming he could make any at all. Sinew might serve in place of leather.

Save— he signed, and then paused, grinding his teeth: he did not remember the sign for "sinew." Eventually, by pointing to the tendons in his own wrist and at the back of the sim's ankles, he put across his meaning. The male gave him a dubious look no butler would have been ashamed of, but went over to the sim acting as butcher and passed the message along. That male shrugged as if to say the trapper was daft, but eventually set beside him several glistening white lengths, each with bits of flesh still clinging to it.

He did not work on the bow for several days after that. His fever returned. It was not strong enough to drive him into delirium, but did leave him shivering and miserable. He glumly crunched the dusty maiden roots the female sim brought him, and wished he felt more like a human being, or even a healthy sim.

Because he was still aware of his surroundings, he really noticed then the care the female sim gave him. It fed him, got him water, cleansed him, hauled him from place to place to keep him from lying in his own dung. It might not have been as gentle as a human nurse, but it was more conscientious than most.

Not only was this spell of fever less severe than the last had been, it was shorter. Yet even after Quick began to feel better, he kept on waking up chilled. Only when he saw the sims also clutching themselves, building thicker piles of bedding, and huddling close to the fire did he un-

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derstand the weather was what was changing. Autumn was drawing near, and hard on its heels would come winter.

The sims did what they could to get ready for it. They brought in stones and brush, which they began to work into a windbreak. As the days went by, it grew thicker and taller, and extended all the way around the clearing, with a couple of thin spots through which the sims could push. They also stacked up great heaps of firewood; once the snow started, it would not be so easy to collect. Quick's hatchets helped them there. They could not have cut so much wood with their crude tools alone.

Some of them even realized it. The male that had brought the trapper the marten pelt hefted its hatchet when it saw he was watching and signed, *Good.*

It was less happy, however, over his efforts to make arrows that were worth anything. Finding really straight lengths of branch was hard enough. Getting points on them proved worse. Because the sims used stone tools, Quick had assumed they could easily chip out little stone arrowheads. But the tools they were used to making were hand-sized choppers and scrapers. They had never done the fine, tiny flakework arrowheads required. If Quick had shown them how, they could have duplicated his efforts. He had no skill in shaping stone, though, and soon discovered that knowing what he wanted was very different from knowing how to make it.

By the time the first frost appeared on the windbreak, he no longer worried about getting knocked over the head for failing to produce. If the sims decided to do that, he could not stop them, but that fatalistic certainty was only a small part of what gradually let him relax.

Far more important was that the sims accepted him. They had grown accustomed to him lying by the fire, and no longer saw him as much different from one of themselves, except that he could not move. His chief worry became a fear of what would happen if a youngster tripped over his broken leg while playing. Where the young sims had once crowded up to gape at him, now they were so careless around him that he sometimes wondered if they remembered he was there.

The leg still hurt. It also itched savagely; he rubbed the flesh round the healing gash raw until he understood the itch came from far within. He healed despite the itch, little by little. Milestones were small, but he treasured them: the day he could sit up, the day he could roll onto his side to air the sores on his back and behind, the day those sores started to scab over.

Milestones or not, he remained immobile, save when a sim dragged him along. Except for his annoyingly troublesome work on the bow, he had little to do but lie by the fire and watch the members of the band. Just as they accepted him, so he came to think of them more and more

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as individuals, as people, rather than as subhumans, animals really, to evade or exploit.

Looking back, he supposed the beginning of that process came when he finally decided that thinking of the male that had brought him the marten skin by that clumsy handle was more trouble that it was worth. He decided to call it Martin and have done. Giving the sim a man's name helped him think of it as being more like a man.

One by one, he named all the sims. Most of his names were just tags in his own mind. The sims had so much trouble reproducing the sounds of English that they could not use his names themselves, which made him hesitate to apply them. Martin, however, soon learned what noise meant him (with a man's name, Martin was also harder to think of as *it*).

The female that cared for Henry Quick also rapidly figured out what names were for. He called her Sal.

Even though he continued to improve, he knew how dependent on her he still was. He whittled away at a couple of branches, slowly turning them into crutches, but he was not ready to try them yet. A fall, a slip, would put paid to weeks of slow recovery. In any case, he had nowhere to go now that the weather was changing.

Sal went right on caring for him as she had all along. She also got better and better as his assistant in the effort to unravel the secrets of the bow. She would have been better yet, he thought glumly, had her mentor been worth a damn. She faithfully copied his blunders one by one, but stopped making them as soon as he did. He knew a lot of people back in the Commonwealths who, having settled on a particular mistake, would keep making it till the end of time.

He also knew a lot of people who would have turned up their noses—in the most literal sense—at the continuing unpleasant labor involved in disposing of his wastes and getting the filth off him afterwards. Sal never faltered. In the days when he was still on his feet, he had improvised a good many strange wipes for his hindquarters, but in that regard Sal's ingenuity outdid his. He was grateful, and sometimes amused. He knew perfectly well that he never would have thought of using grouse feathers, for instance.

Sal also kept using that same wooden cup to help him pass water. He sometimes thought the simple desire to piss while upright would be what finally drove him to his feet. He was glad he had the sense to recognize that urge as a sign of returning health, and did not try to act on it too soon.

Another sign came not long afterwards, on a day where, even by the fire, the wind held a chilly promise of the snow that would come soon. As he had countless times before, Quick called Sal's name and asked for

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the cup. She finished working the seeds out of a couple of pinecones she had found, brought it over to him.

She took him in hand, again as she had so often before. What happened then, though, was new and strange, for he felt himself stiffening at the sim's touch.

It was hard to say which of them was more surprised. Henry Quick had been lustful enough out on the trap line, but there is nothing like a compound fracture of the leg and a long bout of fever to make a man put aside such concerns.

Had Sal ignored his rise, simply put his penis in the cup and waited, the moment would have passed. The sim seemed about to do just that, then paused, looked down, and quietly said, "Hoo!"

Quick started to sign for Sal to take her hand away, but the sim, still perhaps more in the spirit of experimentation than anything else, stroked him for the first time with deliberate intent. His recovering body responded to the touch before his mind could will it not to. And in any event, once he was fully, rampantly, and so unexpectedly erect, his mind had very little to say.

The sim swung astride him, lowered onto him. He gasped; entering Sal felt no different from having a woman. Even so, seeing her there above him, hairy, chinless, and heavy-browed, made him shut his eyes in a spasm of revulsion.

Yet the act went on, whether he watched or not. And indeed, closing his eyes, regardless of his reason, made matters seem much more familiar. He felt the thick hair on Sal's thighs and buttocks as she rode him, but that sensation was distant, insignificant, when set against the explosion building in his loins. Nor were the small, wordless noises the sim made unlike the ones he had heard in bedrooms back in the Commonwealths. Too often those were from women who sighed more for his coins on the dresser than for himself; the sim had no such art.

No wonder, then, that his hips bucked of themselves, or that his hands reached out to take hold of Sal's breasts. He almost jerked them away again, for the hair that covered all the breasts but the nipples reminded him he was in no bedroom now. Then climax swept over him, and for an endless instant he did not care where he was.

Sal rolled away as soon as he was through. He kept his eyes shut, trying to sort things out; he felt simultaneously as fine and as wretched as he could ever recall.

He opened his eyes. Sal was looking at him. He nodded, not yet trusting either speech or hand-talk. The sim nodded back. *Good*, Sal signed.

"All right," the trapper said, surprising himself as usual when he spoke out loud. His equanimity was coming back. How many times had he told himself that if he was going to live with the sims he would have to live

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like a sim? A wry grin settled on his face. Eating grubs was all very well, but he had not expected to take things quite this far.

Again? Sal asked, and no grin, no matter how wry, could survive that question. Once he could explain away, even to himself, as something beyond his control. Repeating the act, though, would be committing himself to what he, along with almost everyone in the Commonwealths, thought of as disgusting.

And yet the coupling had not been the sordid sort of masturbation he imagined mating with a mare or ewe might be. Sal had been a partner in the act, not a mere uncomprehending receptacle for his lust. Indeed, that he was being asked whether he wanted to go again said a good deal. In the end, the question, more than anything else, was what decided him.

"All right," he repeated. The sim could not have understood his words, but got the meaning from his tone. As sims were wont to do, Sal took him literally, and at once set about restoring his manhood. He thought that would be futile so soon after the first round, but his body, long deprived, proved him wrong. The sim mounted him again. Normally he preferred riding to being ridden, but his leg made that not worth thinking about.

This time the joining was slower, less fervent. Quick left his eyes open. The sims in the clearing were paying hardly more attention to him and Sal than they would have to a pair of their own kind, and the difference, he judged, was not prurience, only curiosity about how he performed. Once they saw he functioned much like them, they went back to whatever they had been doing.

He still did not look much at Sal, concentrating instead on what he was feeling. As before, that was like in its essence to having a woman, but now he noticed the peripheral differences more. The hairiness of the sim's body distracted him once or twice. Only later did he wonder if his own relatively smooth skin was as strange to Sal.

He did notice the sim's strength when she—in the middle of coupling, he could not think of Sal as *it*—grasped him as they mated. He had never bedded a woman at least as strong as he was.

That thought diverted Quick's attention again. He wondered how the males would react to his joining the band in this last, most intimate sense. Some had partners who mated more or less steadily with them, but the dominant males of the hunting party, Martin and two or three others, also coupled with the unattached females of the band. Now the trapper was part of that hierarchy. He wondered where he fit. He could not hunt. He could not even walk. If he was to gain importance, it would have to come through his wits.

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Anyway, he thought as sensation built toward release, it was too late to worry now.

But afterwards he worked away on the bow and arrows with more concentration than he had shown for several days. Nor could he stifle a twinge of alarm when Martin loomed over him, hands on hips, to inspect what he was up to. But the sim, as usual, was businesslike. *Sticks fly?* Martin asked.

Henry Quick shrugged. It was always a good question. After endless effort, he had figured out how to chip reasonably small, reasonably sharp arrowheads—they were better points than he got by simply whittling away at the tip of the arrow, at any rate. Now he was having trouble making the miserable arrows go straight.

The first ones he'd tried just spun crazily, which was good for making the sims laugh but not much else. Then he vaguely remembered that proper arrows had feathers at the back to make them fly true. Getting feathers was no problem. The sims threw rocks well enough to bring down a lot of birds. Getting the feathers to stay on the arrows was a whole different problem. The sims knew nothing about glue, and Quick did not know how to make it either.

So far his best solution was cutting thin grooves in the shafts and sliding the feathers into them. That was not nearly good enough. Once in a while, one of his arrows would fly straight and thwock into a tree with enough force to stick, which made the sims hoot appreciatively. More often, a feather would come out in flight, which made the arrow behave as if it were trying to dodge its target instead of hitting it.

Sal continued to help in his bow-building efforts, and to care for him as she had been doing. She never understood much English beside her name, but he passed a lot of time talking first to her, then with her, in hand-talk. They did best at the purely pragmatic level. At that level, she understood why the people back in the Commonwealths wanted the furs he had come to trap. *Furs warm*, she signed, running a hand over his relatively naked skin. *No hair, need warm.* She stroked her own red-brown hair to emphasize the contrast. Her hair had grown thicker, almost furry, as the season changed.

When Quick tried to explain that people coveted furs for their beauty as well as warmth, he ran into a blank wall. Sims did have an aesthetic sense of sorts, but it was limited to things they made themselves. A fur was just a fur.

He did better getting across the idea of rarity. Begging for food was a simple kind of bargaining, and the sims had learned he would give them his strange and wonderful metal tools in exchange for furs. *In my band*, he signed, *many tools, few furs. Here many furs, few tools. You want tools, we want furs.*

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Sal nodded. *Why few furs there?* she asked. Her hand-talk was far more fluid than it had been when he first met her band. She, and to a lesser extent the rest of the band, had also learned a number of signs they had not known before.

Many people, he answered. *Much hunting.*

Sal understood that. A band of sims that grew too large for its territory to support soon shrank again from starvation.

Some parts of life in the Commonwealths—railroads, steamboats—Quick did not even try to explain. Getting across the idea of a house, a permanent place to live, was hard enough, as were domesticated plants and animals. To Sal, it all seemed a vision of unparalleled abundance. *Warm place to sleep?* she signed. *Plenty to eat? No hunting?*

The trapper nodded, admitting it.

Why come here? Sal asked.

To get furs, was the only answer Quick could put across. Wanderlust meant nothing to the sim; Sal's band knew a territory perhaps twenty miles square as intimately as anyone could, but nothing of the world beyond it. Explaining that he often found the company of his fellow men oppressive was also next to impossible.

You, they fight? Sal asked.

No, he signed, but then, after thinking about it, had to add, *I stay with other men long time, maybe fight.* He knew how impatient he could get with people's foolishness. He really did not have that problem with the band of sims. They were not smart enough to make idiots of themselves on purpose; what brains they had, they had to use.

He wanted to do something for Sal, to show his gratitude in a more permanent, more substantial way than their coupling. After the first few times, he had stopped worrying about whether those matings constituted bestiality. That was more because he thought of himself as a member of the band of sims than because he suddenly reckoned her human, but the effect was the same: he concentrated on their similarities rather than their differences.

The problem was that the sims lived at the barest subsistence level. Things that would have been appropriate back in the Commonwealths were incomprehensible and so valueless here. Before he fully realized that, Quick spent a good deal of time whittling a piece of pine into the shape of a spearfang. Sal looked at it when he proudly presented it to her. She was interested; she had never seen an image before. But she was not really pleased.

Inspiration struck when the trapper saw how the hunting party of males behaved when they came into the clearing on a day after the snow had begun to fall. The sims threw down the carcasses they had brought

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into the clearing, then, as one, rushed to put their feet as close to the fire as they could.

Quick smelled singeing hair, but did not blame the sims a bit. For him, even healthy, going out into the snow barefoot would have meant at the very least losing toes to frostbite. The sims' feet were hairy above and had thickly callused soles, so those risks were less for them. Nothing, however, could make such shoeless travel anything but icy.

The females, Sal among them, also had to brave the winter to forage and to cut firewood. Henry Quick suddenly realized that, while his boots did not have laces any more, they were much better than nothing. Before Sal went out the next time, he showed her how to put them on her feet.

She did not like them; they must have felt strange and confining. But when she came back, her broad grin gleamed like the snow that still clung to the load of fir branches she was carrying. *Warm*, she signed unbelievingly, pointing to her feet. *Warm.* She let out a loud hoot of glee, bent down beside Quick to hug him and plant exuberant kisses on his face and shoulders. *Warm*, she signed again. *Feet warm.*

Quick felt warm himself, no easy trick that winter. He was glad he had found a gift that made her happy.

The boots also made the other sims jealous. Quick tried to fix that as fast as he could; he did not want Sal to suffer when he'd only meant to help. The only solution he came up with involved sacrificing his trousers, which he could not wear anyhow. They made several pairs of improvised footgear, not as good as real boots but far superior to bare feet, even leathery, hairy bare feet.

His makeshift cordwainery let Sal keep the boots that had been his. That relieved him a great deal, but only for a few days.

Martin had probably the best set of makeshifts. Once he was convinced they did some good, he signed, *All hunters need.*

Leather gone, Quick answered. Martin gave a dissatisfied grunt. The trapper hoped the sim would not demand the tunic off his back. He needed it. Also fearing the big male would take his boots away from Sal, the trapper suggested, *Make foot things from skins of animals you kill.*

Skins stink fast, Martin signed.

Quick remembered promising to show the grizzled sim how to make leather. Now, in a way, he could keep that promise. *Rub skins with bark from spruce*, he signed. *Then stink slow, maybe not stink.*

Martin grunted again. *Do*, he signed. Before long, Quick was doing as much skinning, scraping, and curing as he had working the trap line. He had been a lot of things before, but never a cobbler for sims.

The cold wet weather made his leg hurt worse, but with a different kind of pain, one he suspected would be with him the rest of his life: he knew several men with healed broken bones who were the best prophets

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of rain for miles around. Now at least he felt himself definitely on the mend. The successive triumphs were small but satisfying: he treasured the day he sat up by himself, the day he rolled over, the day he coupled with Sal with him on top. His sticks were still awkward, and so was she. That was not a posture sims often used. Neither, come to that, was female atop male; most often they mated from behind, like beasts.

Like any other beasts, Quick realized he would have thought before his enforced sojourn here. Yet they learned far more than beasts. That applied to other things than seeing the utility of boots. Every so often, around the fire, the trapper would notice the subhumans joining as he and Sal did. He smiled every time. That was not one of the things he had intended to teach them.

Without the fire and the windbreak, the band of sims could not have survived. In the worst storms none of them went out, except to gather more wood. They huddled in their bedding close by the fire, hugging one another for extra warmth. Often they went a couple of days without food. They were used to going hungry.

Quick was not. His belly began to preoccupy him even more than his leg. Whenever the hunting party came back with game, his stomach heralded their arrival with growls a wolf would have been proud of.

Thanks in no small part to his hatchets, the fire never went out, nor did the sims have to sacrifice the windbreak or rob it so it became threadbare. Indeed, the females and youngsters cut so much more wood than they had been able to before that the band often used the piles of fragrant branches waiting for the fires to thicken and restore their beds. Quick had done that himself on the trapping line; fir branches made a fine mattress on which to lay a blanket.

Being now without a blanket, the trapper happily joined the sims in burrowing among the branches and using them to hold his body warmth. His nose grew so used to the thick, resinous smell of fir that he had to make a conscious effort to notice it. He found that the sap which oozed from them was easier to clean from his relatively smooth skin than to get out of the sims' hair.

The sims spent a fair amount of time grooming one another under any circumstances; it was as much a part of their social lives as back-fence chatter was back in the Commonwealths. Quick did not mind taking part. Getting Sal's hair smooth and neat pleased him. He made an absent mental note to carve out a comb when he had the chance. The sap left his hands constantly sticky, and spit did not take it off.

For a while he accepted that as just another nuisance. Then his whoop made sims all over the clearing jump. If spit did not dissolve the resin, neither would water. Now feathers would stay where he put them.

He had a couple of dozen shafts finished by the time Martin came into

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the clearing, staggering under the weight of the fawn in his arms. Quick was no archer, and was doubly hampered by having to shoot sitting down. Nevertheless, he sent several arrows close to a treetrunk farther away than anyone could throw a stone.

His wrist raw and red from being lashed by the sinew bowstring, he handed the bow to Martin. The sim had only used it a couple of times before, but already showed signs of being a better marksman than Quick. Martin grunted when the first two arrows went where he aimed them, then said "Hoo!" as a third followed.

He shot again, as if to reassure himself it was no fluke, then thrust the bow back to the trapper. *Make more*, he signed. Quick had won over the skeptic.

With Sal's help, Quick went from cobbler to bowyer and fletcher. He had finished a handful of crude bows and close to a hundred arrows before he paused to wonder about what he was doing. Men had always pushed forward across America as they pleased, not least because sims lacked the weapons to fight back. A bow was nowhere near so potent as a gun, but it was vastly better than anything the subhumans had had before. Not only that, it was simple enough for them to make and care for themselves, which was not true of firearms.

After some thought, he decided it did not matter. For one thing, ideas did not move quickly from one band of sims to the next: how recently this band had acquired hand-talk showed that. For another, even with bows the sims could hardly become more than a nuisance. And finally, staying alive now counted for more than any hypothetical trouble in the future. In such matters, the trapper was an eminently practical man.

He grinned from ear to ear when the hunting party began coming back with more game than they ever had before. *Not need close*, one signed, holding a rabbit with blood on its white fur in front of Quick's face. The male kissed the trapper's cheek, then patted his own belly. *Kill from far, eat good.*

Save for a single infant, not a sim had died this winter, though it was the desperate time of year for the wild bands. Quick was amazed at the difference the extra fuel and now the extra food made.

But winter was also the desperate time of year for the other predators that roamed the woods. One morning a female started to push aside a chunk of the windbreak, then shoved back the piled branches with a shriek of fright. A wolf bayed anger and frustration and hunger. Around the windbreak, the rest of the pack took up the chorus. The sims were besieged.

Sal shivered, next to Quick. Cold had nothing to do with it. *Wolves stay*, she signed. *Stay, stay, stay. We hungry, hungry. We go out, they eat. They eat enough, then finally go.*

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The rest of the sims seemed sunk in the same fearful depression. None showed any sign of trying to drive the wolves away, nor did they reach for the bows that lay by the fire. Their wits were slower than men's after all, Quick saw: they had trouble grasping that what served so well on the hunt would also defend them.

He was sure they would eventually have worked it through for themselves, but lacked the patience to wait. He shouted till he had Martin's attention. His voice also roused the devil's choir outside the windbreak, but he did not care about that. *Take bows, arrows*, he signed. *Shoot wolves*. He rendered that by pantomiming drawing a bow back to his ear. *Shoot wolves, those you not shoot run away*.

The big male rubbed his long, chinless jaw as he wrestled with the idea. He sprang to his feet with a wordless yell, ran for the weapons. He dashed to the windbreak, peered through. Quick heard a snarl from the far side. The wolf was not afraid of a sim, especially not with a barrier between them.

Martin aimed the bow through a gap in the branches. He let fly. The wolf's fierce growls turned to a yowl of agony that went on and on. The howls from the rest of the pack stopped abruptly.

Quick feared and hated wolves: after sims, they were the most dangerous creatures in the woods. A bear or a spearfang, of course, was more than a match for a wolf, but a pack of wolves would run even a spearfang off its prey. Had the trapper been able to stand, he would have gone to the windbreak to fire his rifle and pistol at the beasts.

The sims proved able to deal with things on their own. Martin dashed to another hole in the windbreak. He shot again. A wounded wolf ki-yied in pain. That was enough to send more males rushing up to grab the rest of the bows and arrows. In minutes, several more wolves had been hit, and the rest of the pack was in full retreat. The male sims took clubs and spears outside the windbreak to finish off the animals they had wounded.

Roast wolf tasted much better than Quick had thought it would.

A few days later, the weather turned clear and, for the season, warm. The trapper, with the aid of Sal and of the crutches he had fashioned weeks before, stood up for the first time since the sims had brought him into the clearing. The effort even a couple of steps required left him weak and gasping. His left leg, from lack of use, was almost as feeble as his right, which he still did not try to touch to the ground.

But he was upright at last. The sense of freedom that brought was intoxicating. He leaned over and kissed Sal on the lips. He had never done that before. The motion almost made him fall. Sal steadied him. They both laughed. He kissed her again. This time they did slide to the ground, carefully, still laughing, and ended up coupling.

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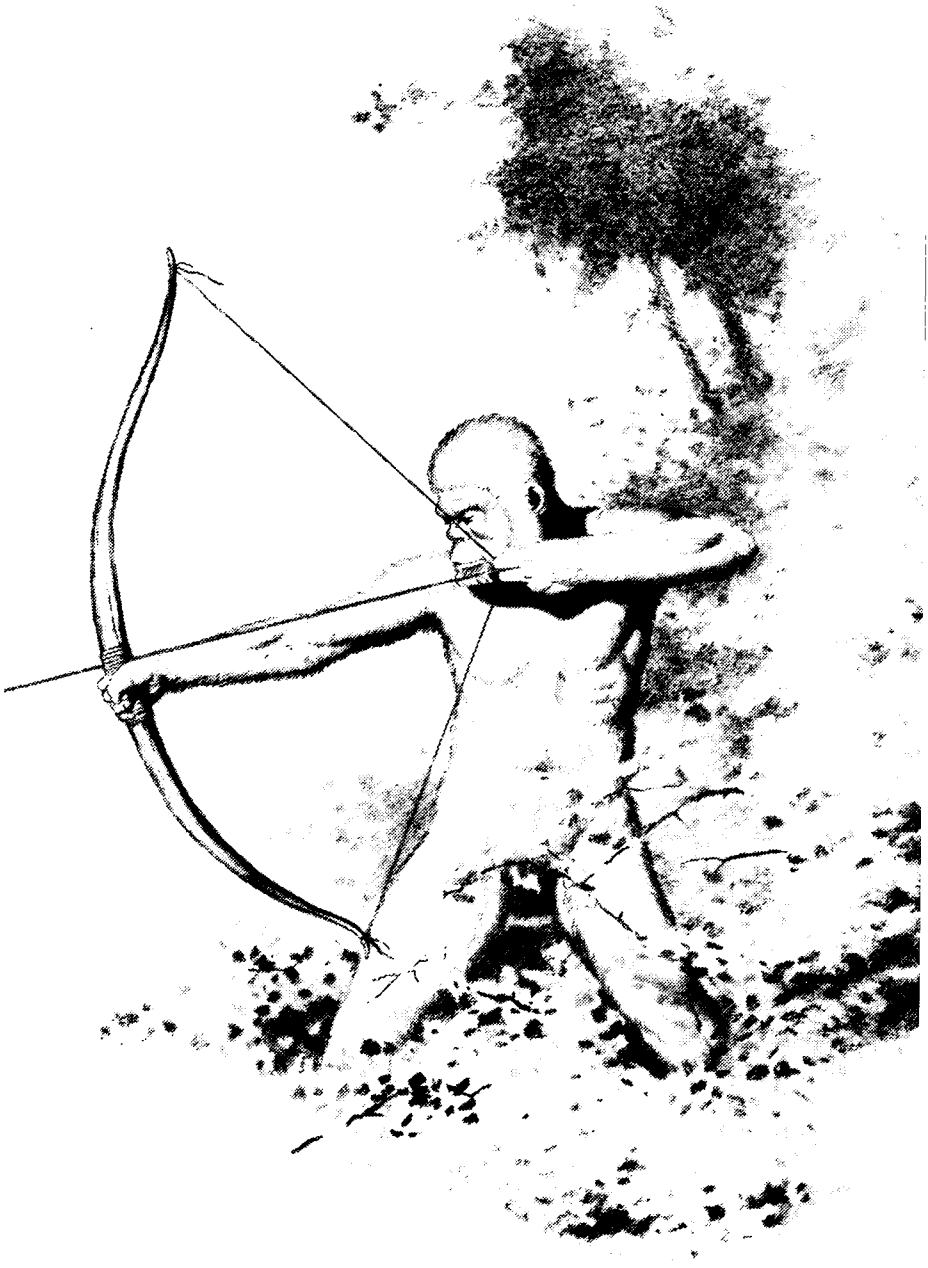

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Afterwards, Sal got up to gather wood, leaving Quick by himself; she took pleasure in the act, but knew nothing of lazing in the afterglow. A smile still on his lips, Quick watched her retreating form.

There, he thought, goes a hell of a woman. Hearing the word in his own mind brought him up short. It had been a while since he took a real look at what he felt about her.

That her body pleased him had been a surprise, but was no longer. Now he noticed her hairiness, her features, hardly more than had she been black or had very blue eyes. He was used to her, as one person grows used to another.

What did surprise him was how much he liked her. He knew that had grown from her caring for him, but there was more to it now. Her happiness mattered to him: why else had he given her his boots, and worried so much over whether Martin would take them away that he devised substitutes?

And if he desired her, and at the same time wanted to gladden her in other ways—He startled himself by speaking out loud. "If that's not love, I don't know what the devil is."

The summer before, using that word in connection with a sim would have struck him as as ridiculous as thinking of a female sim as a woman. He shrugged, not so disturbed as he expected to be. Living as part of the band had changed his perspective.

Sims weren't men, he thought, but they were people. He nodded slowly, pleased with the distinction. The sims had been living in these woods for who knew how many years. For the first time, Quick felt guilty over the way men were supplanting wild sims all across the continent. Even tame sims depended on their masters' whim for security. The trapper had trouble finding that right, but did not know what else could have happened, either.

The more the sims hunted with bows, the deadlier they grew. The males brought in such an unending stream of game that the clearing constantly smelled of cooking meat. The whole band began to lose the gauntness that went with winter.

None of them, though, was fat; to Quick, a fat wild sim was a contradiction in terms. So he thought, at any rate, until he noticed Sal's belly beginning to protrude. Yet she showed no extra flesh on her limbs or in her face. The trapper scratched his head and kept on trying to get about with his crutches.

His right leg was never going to be the same. There was an enormous lump of bone where the leg had been broken and had not healed straight, which made it a little shorter than its mate. Quick stumped patiently back and forth, putting as much weight on it as he could. Day by day it

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bore more, but he knew he had made his last trapping run. He would need a stick for the rest of his life.

He was exercising, his mind, he would have sworn, somewhere far away, when the reason Sal was putting on weight dawned on him. He sat down heavily. No matter how often his body had joined with hers, he had never thought issue might spring from it. In hindsight, that was stupid. In hindsight, of course, a lot of things were stupid.

He stayed on his haunches, lost in his own thoughts. When Sal came back from a foraging trip, she gave him a reproachful look. *Not walk?* she asked.

No. Henry Quick pointed at her. *Baby in you?*

She glanced down at herself. The bulge was obvious, so obvious that Quick again kicked himself for not figuring out what it meant before. She signed, *Baby in me.*

She did not say anything about him being the father, though since that first time she had rarely coupled with any partner but him. After a moment, he realized he had never seen any sim in the band use the sign for father. They valued mating for its own sake, not for the sake of children, and had never made the connection between the two.

He wondered what to do, and wished he were callous enough for her pregnancy to make no difference to him. He had intended to head back toward the Commonwealths as soon as the snow melted. Now . . . it would not be so easy. *You want me stay here?* he signed.

Where go? Sal asked.

To men like me.

Sal frowned. One of him was strange enough; visualizing many of his kind took more imagination than she had. At last she signed, *Winter not gone.*

"Only too right it's not," Quick said aloud. Even on a mild day like this one, the breeze made his teeth chatter. At first he thought Sal had changed the subject, but after a moment he realized such subtlety was beyond her. She'd simply pointed out that, whatever he decided to do, he wasn't going to do it tomorrow, or the day after either.

He thought about what staying with the sims, never going back to the Commonwealths, would be like. He cared for Sal as he had for no woman on the other side of the Rockies, and she was carrying his child. That counted for something, but he was not sure in which direction it swung the balance. Son of a sim was a bad enough thing to call a man, but father of a sim . . . ? Still, he could be like a god if he chose to stay. There was so much the sims did not know—

He laughed at himself. Like a god, was it? A god who huddled naked, cold, and stinking in fir branches, who ate whatever was alive (or had been lately) and was glad to get it, who could not even use his own speech

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but had to content himself with a clumsy, limited makeshift? Anyone who bought godhood on those terms deserved to think he had it.

That the trapper lived hardly better than the sims while in the field did not enter into the equation. He deliberately chose those hardships to escape from his fellow men for a time, and to earn the money to live high when he got back to civilization. Until now, he had never imagined staying west of the mountains. Without Sal, he would have had no doubts.

Without Sal, he would have been dead months before, and not been in this quandary.

She touched his arm. Under their shelf of bone, her brown eyes were troubled. Male sims were not normally quiet and reflective. Sal had accepted that Henry Quick sometimes was, but had also come to know him well enough to tell when his thoughts troubled him. *You good?* she asked. Even after trading signs with him for so long, she could not come closer than that to probing his feelings.

He spread his palms, a gesture that meant neither yes nor no.

She rummaged about, offered him some half-frozen cattail roots she had found. *Eat*, she signed, as if food could ease mental as well as physical distress. He sighed and declined. Sal made another gesture. He acted on that one, but afterwards, no matter how sated his body was, his mind would not rest.

How could it be love, he wondered, when he could not even express the idea to Sal? But what else was it? He had no answer, not even for himself. He turned to Sal. *You want me to go?* he asked.

It was her turn to hesitate. Finally she signed, *Do good for you.* He tugged at his beard, frowning; sometimes sims' statements were oracular in their obscurity. At last he decided she was telling him that the most important thing was his own happiness, a curious mirroring of his own feelings toward her. And if that wasn't love, what else was it?

But even if it was, was it worth abandoning the Commonwealths for good? He had known a fair number of men who gave up the lives they had known to stay with a woman with whom they had fallen in love. Once the first flush faded, most came to regret it.

Something else occurred to the trapper. He was the first man into this part of the wilderness, but he would not be the last. He did not have to wonder what the newcomers would think of him: just what he would have thought before the bear wrecked his leg. Tales of Quick the Sim-lover might get him remembered forever, but not in a way he wanted. What else was he, though?

He did not even think of taking Sal back to the Commonwealths with him. He knew the ostracism that would bring, the more so as she carried his child. She did not deserve to face that. Apart from it, too, he doubted she could adapt to life east of the Rockies. She was a creature of the

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wilds, no less than the marten or the spearfang. If he chose to live with her, it would have to be here.

He bit down on his lip till he tasted blood, then slowly made himself relax. As Sal had reminded him, winter was a long way from over. Nothing he decided now could be final; he would be rehashing it endlessly for weeks to come. Best to put it aside as well as he could, and wait to see what those weeks would bring.

That sadly indecisive and unoriginal conclusion was enough to grant him rest at last.

Whenever the weather was clear enough and warm enough to let him, he kept exercising, working to put strength back in his long-inactive legs. He got to the point where he could stump about on his crutches with Sal lending him strength and balance, and then, a good many days later, managed to hobble along with but a single stick. Most of the time, though, he spent as he had the rest of the winter—under cover.

Martin stayed on good terms with the trapper. Part of that was because of the bows and arrows Quick kept turning out. By now the sims' products—especially the arrowheads—were as good as anything he could make, but he had more leisure than they in which to make them. Moreover, Martin must have realized that without Quick, the band never would have known of bows and arrows in the first place.

The sim kept drawing the trapper out, hoping to pick up more ideas the band could use. Quick racked his brains, but came up with little. No matter how free-ranging a life he lived in the wild, most of what he knew depended in some part on civilized techniques he could not match here, or on domesticated plants and animals, equally unattainable locally.

He had never thought of things as basic as wheat and flax, sheep and cattle, as being civilized techniques until he tried to change a way of life without them.

Most of the other males let Quick alone. That was not so much hostility as uncertainty over where he fit into the band. His status could hardly have been more confusing: he had gone from being a powerful outsider to a helpless cripple. As if that were not bad enough, as a helpless cripple he had come up with a notion none of them could have matched.

Had they been men, he knew he could have expected trouble over Sal. He had already seen, though, that that sort of possessiveness was much weaker among sims. The males, then, did not object when he took his share of the meat they brought in, and let it go at that.

Among themselves, they jockeyed for position as they always had. Quick was just as glad not to be involved in that. The males' squabbles reminded him of nothing so much as small boys squaring off to fight. Even perfectly healthy, he would not have relished the prospect of getting

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into a face-to-face screaming match with a wild male—not without his pistol handy, at any rate.

Yet for all the shrieks and gestures, for all the fury and bared teeth, few tiffs actually ended with the combatants rolling and punching and kicking and biting on the ground. Like a lot of small-boy fights, most were games of bluff and counterbluff, good for letting off steam but not changing the status of either participant.

Through the winter, Martin stayed atop the hierarchy. Not only was he in his physical prime, he enjoyed the added prestige the success of Quick's devices brought him. The band had fared well in what was usually a time of privation, and the sims recognized that and gave credit for it.

Most did, at any rate. As with men, some were unwilling to accept anything for which they were not responsible themselves. Three or four males, of middling to fairly high status in the hunting party, began hanging around together. They had been the last ones to start using the bow. Their leader, as much as they had one, was the male with the broken tooth who had wanted to kill Quick and eat him when the hunters came on him after the bear broke his leg.

Since then, and especially since he began to recover, it had had even less to do with him than its fellows, though every so often he would catch it watching him out of the corner of its eye. Because of its almost regal aloofness, and because, although not old, it was going bald, he finally named the male Caesar; it was one of the last ones to pass from *it* to *he* in his mind.

Caesar and his companions all had that same sidelong way of looking at Martin. Quick was slower to put a motive behind it than he would have been with men, but at last he had no more doubts: they were studying their leader, looking for weakness.

If Martin noticed, he gave no sign. When the trapper did his best to warn him, the sim's only response was to tap himself on the chest, as if to say, I can deal with any of them.

The days were growing longer more quickly now; Sal's belly grew more quickly too. Snow turned to icy rain. Quick found that worse than the blizzards that had gone before. The windbreak and the nest of branches had done a fair job of shielding the band—and the trapper—from the snow, which piled up in drifts and lay on top of the nest.

The rain, by contrast, trickled through and made everyone shiveringly miserable. It also threatened to put out the fire. That was not quite the catastrophe it would have been for sims before the days of flint and steel, but it would not have been pleasant. Not only would the blaze have been hard to get going again with everything soaked, but the sims would have suffered from the cold, blustery weather while it was out.

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A couple of males held hides over the fire. Others, at Quick's urging, dug channels to guide the rainwater on the ground away from the burning branches and sticks. A small chorus of "Hoo"s went up as the sims saw the water being turned aside. Sal squeezed the trapper in delight.

They were coupling less often now; her interest waned as her pregnancy advanced. Quick had wondered, with a cold-bloodedness that disturbed him, whether he would stop fancying her once he had to resort to his hand again. He found it was not so. As he had before they first joined in body, he cared for her for herself, not for her anatomy.

Nor did she grow aloof from him in any way but mating. The embrace she gave him after the storm was but one example of that. She stayed by him most of the time when she was not out foraging; brought him tidbits from trips (by now he seldom worried about eating them, whatever they were); and helped him get about, though he was more and more mobile on his own.

She also spent a good deal of time, as was only natural, preoccupied with the child growing within her. *Baby soon*, she would sign, patting her belly or her breasts, which had also swollen some in anticipation of nursing.

Once Quick signed, *Baby look like you and like me.* He touched his forehead, ran his hand along the relatively hairless skin of his arm. Ever since he realized Sal was pregnant, he had wondered which of them the child would more closely resemble. He did not know. He had never seen any crossbreeds, and the wild stories whispered about them varied enough that he could not tell where truth lay. Some claimed crosses could pass as humans, others that they were brutes unable to speak.

The whole concept of fatherhood was alien to Sal. *Baby from me, baby like me*, she insisted, and kept repeating her gestures until Quick gave up. He did not press her for long. Sims had been giving birth to sims for as long as there had been sims; no wonder Sal could not look forward to anything different.

Martin remained the dominant male in the band. Perhaps reacting to Quick's warning, perhaps on his own, he began to be more touchy around Caesar and what the trapper could not help thinking of as his clique. For their part, they placated him, bending their heads and holding out their hands to him, palms up, when he shouted at them or brandished a weapon. As with most confrontations among sims, that was plenty to settle things. Martin would turn his back and swagger away, satisfied he was still cock o' the walk.

Henry Quick shared the big male's exuberance, but only to a point. He could not help noticing that the males in the hunting party who backed Martin were nowhere near so closely knit as Caesar's followers.

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Caesar by himself was no match for Martin; Caesar and several comrades probably were.

Rain came more and more often. Black patches of dirt began to appear. The evergreens lost their white mantles, while buds grew on branches bare for months. Quick heard geese crying far overhead, and on clear days saw V's of black specks flying north against the blue sky.

He wondered, as he had once in a while through the winter, if anyone missed him back in the Commonwealths. Trapping was a risky business, and every year many who tried it never came back. If he did return to civilization, he would be a nine days' wonder. Was that reason enough to make the trip? He doubted it. He also doubted whether he could finish his life among the sims, even loving one. For better or worse, he and they were different.

Unable to decide what to do, he let day follow day, hoping events would solve his problem for him. He got stronger; with his stick, he was not much slower or more awkward than an old man. He could even hobble a couple of steps without it, though his left leg had to take almost all of his weight.

With that success, he began thinking hard about what travel would mean. The idea of depending on archery to feed himself was appalling. His powderhorn was still half full. He had done his best to keep rifle and pistol dry through the winter, greased them with animal fat, and used dirt and gravel to scour away the rust that did appear. He began substituting the rifle for his stick. The extra weight tired him, but he managed.

He hated to burn powder and waste bullets on test shots, but he would sooner find out whether his guns worked in a setting where his life did not depend on the answer. He loaded them, pointed the pistol in the air, lowered it again. *Big noise*, he signed, warning the females and youngsters in the clearing that morning.

Noise-stick, Sal amplified. The sims had learned the year before that Quick carried noisy weapons that could slay at a distance. Few except the hunting males, though, had heard them. Of course, the trapper thought as he squeezed the trigger, they might not hear one now.

He felt like cheering when the gun went off. The recoil was easier to take than he'd expected, easier even than he remembered; his arms had become very strong from bearing so much of his weight through his sticks.

The sims shrieked. Some clapped hands to ears. Youngsters ran to their mothers. "Big noise" was easier to say than to experience. Even Sal jumped, though she recovered quickly. *Noise-stick good?* she signed.

Good, Quick answered. He fired the rifle. It also worked; its kick almost knocked him over. The report was louder than the pistol-shot had been,

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but the sims did not make quite such a fuss over it—this time they knew what he was warning them about.

He reloaded both guns. If he did decide to leave, having them would make all the difference in the world.

The females and youngsters had a great deal to tell the males when the hunting party returned. Hands fluttered, and in their excitement the sims hooted and yelled to add emphasis to their gestures.

After the commotion died down, Martin came over to Henry Quick. He asked the same question Sal had: *Noise-sticks good?*

The trapper agreed they were.

Hunt with us? the sim asked.

Too slow, not keep up.

Martin rubbed his jaw. He could not disagree with that. At length he signed, *Give me noise-stick.*

Quick had expected something of the sort. *You not work noise-stick,* he signed. To make sure he was not lying, he had surreptitiously removed the flints from his guns while the females were carrying on. He did not resist when Martin took the pistol away from him.

The sim knew what the trigger was for, but only a click rewarded him when he pulled it. He tried the rifle, with the same result. Growling in frustration, he shoved them back to Quick and stalked away. The trapper made sure the sim was not looking before he restored the flints to their places.

The next morning, most of the hunting party set out early, as they usually did. Martin hung back. He walked up and down examining the windbreak, plainly trying to decide whether it was time to turn it into firewood.

Caesar and two more males, ones with whom he associated, also stayed behind. As far as Quick could see, they were not doing anything in particular. He practiced his walking, limping along holding his rifle in his right hand as a staff and carrying his pistol in his left. The morning was humid, so his leg hurt more than usual.

When Martin turned away from the windbreak and spotted the other males still in the clearing, he shouted angrily at them. *Go! Hunt!* he signed, his gestures quick and peremptory. He was still wearing the makeshift belt Quick had made for him from a bootlace. He yanked free a dagger, waved it in the air.

Quick expected Caesar and his followers to go meekly on their way, as they always had before. They did not. Maybe they had planned it among themselves, maybe they simply noticed they were three to Martin's one. They held their ground and yelled back.

Instantly pandemonium filled the clearing. Several females ran to Martin and added their yells to his. Almost as many, though, backed

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Caesar and his two comrades. Quick stood off to one side and wished his hands were free so he could cover his ears. Sal, he thought, would have favored Martin, but she was already off in the woods.

The two groups of sims, still shrieking, drew closer to each other. Caesar, seemingly given courage by the males at his back, did not shrink as Martin approached. Instead he advanced to confront him, windmilling his arms and shouting as loudly as his opponent. The encounter was at a level too basic for either of them to bother with signs; their innate responses were what counted now.

All the same, the quarrel might have ended peaceably, or with no more than pushes and shoves. Most incidents among sims did. But when Martin reached out to push Caesar away, he still had the sharp steel dagger in his fist. It scored a dripping line down the other sim's chest.

Caesar shrieked again, a cry full of pain, surprise, and fury. Martin might have finished him at that moment, but instead stared, as much taken aback as his foe, at the blood running through Caesar's hair. An instant was all Martin got. Fast as a striking snake, Caesar bent down, grabbed a branch, and slammed it into the dominant male's side. Then he sprang for Martin. They fell together, biting and gouging and kicking.

Henry Quick had not thought the din could get louder. He found he was wrong. The sims gathered in a tight knot around the two battling males. They were all screaming at the tops of their lungs, and beginning to struggle with one another.

One of Caesar's supporting males also had a knife. He shoved a female aside, almost pitching her into the fire, and stooped over the two main combatants. He slashed at one of them, presumably Martin. An anguished bellow arose, loud enough to be heard through the noisy chaos all around.

Quick limped forward. That Martin had to fight for his life was one thing, that he should be beset by two at once something else again. The male was raising an arm to bring down the dagger again. The trapper shifted his weight to his left foot; that leg would have to bear most of it for a moment. He used the stock of his rifle to knock the knife out of the sim's hand, then hit the male in the temple with it.

That second blow might have felled a man. Sims had heavier skulls and thicker muscles over them. The male blinked, shook his head, spat blood. He grabbed Quick by the shoulders and threw him to the ground. A burly lumberjack might have matched it, but the sim was half a foot shorter than Quick.

The trapper landed heavily; the rifle came out of his hand and bounced away. Pain flared in his ribs and in his bad leg. That's what you get for sticking your nose in, he thought blurrily. But the male was not done

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with him. The sim seized his rifle, lifted it high, and stamped toward him, plainly intending to beat him to death.

He still held on to his pistol. He cocked it with desperate haste and fired. He aimed for the sim's chest. The ball took the male in the belly instead.

The noise of the shot shocked the sims into momentary silence. Nothing else, perhaps, could have distracted them so effectively from their own quarrels. Leaning up on one elbow, Quick saw one of the two males around whom the bigger squabble had revolved also sitting up, pushing away the inert body of his foe. Martin had won the fight; blood was still flowing from a score of Caesar's wounds. Yet by the way he moved, the victor was also badly hurt.

Quick spared him hardly a glance, though. The trapper's horrified attention was drawn to the male he had shot. The same was true for all the sims in the clearing. Quick had heard tales of the agony of gutshot men. Now he saw it at first hand.

The sim rolled and thrashed, hands clutched the hole above and to one side of its navel. Blood trickled between its fingers. Soon more came from its anus. When it emptied its bladder a moment later, that discharge too was red. The sim shrieked and wailed.

Two or three females came running from the woods; the gunshot drew them when they had not heard the sound of the fight. Sal was the last of them; her bulging belly made her move slowly. Quick was glad to see her, and even gladder she had not been in the clearing before.

He struggled to his feet. His right leg groaned but did not scream; he had not rebroken it. He picked up his rifle and hobbled over toward Martin. When Sal came up to help him as she had so many times before, he gratefully let her bear some of his weight. The other sims, their eyes still on the awful spectacle of the male he had shot, stepped out of his way. None of them signed to him. None of them seemed to want to have anything to do with him.

Pain twisted Martin's face. His hairy hide was scraped away in a dozen places to show raw, bleeding flesh. Caesar had bitten half of one ear away. Martin was holding his ribs with one hand, and had the other at the back of his left heel.

When the trapper saw that, and saw how the sim's left calf was bunched but his foot limp, he had a sinking feeling that made him forget his bruises. Against all odds, he had recovered from his own crippling injury, at least enough to get about. Martin never would, not when he was hamstrung.

Martin took his hands from his wounds, signed, *Fix leg?* His eyes were full of desperate appeal. They held Quick's.

Seeing how Martin's thoughts paralleled his own only made Henry

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Quick feel worse. Behind the trapper, the male he had shot screamed on, unceasing and dreadful. *Not fix*, Quick had to sign.

Sal stared at him in amazement. *Fix*, she signed firmly. *Use sticks. Sticks fix your leg, sticks fix his leg.*

Not fix, the trapper repeated miserably. *His leg not hurt same way.* How could he explain that the splints only held the pieces of his shattered leg together while the bone healed, but that you could splint a cut tendon from now till doomsday and it would never mend? He could not, not with the limited hand-talk Sal knew.

And if he had, she would not have believed him. *Sticks*, she signed, and stepped away from him to get a couple.

At least she was doing something constructive. The rest of the sims in the clearing wandered about dazedly, like men and women who had been through a train wreck. Quick could see why. In the space of a few minutes, the band had suffered disaster. Two prime males were dead (even if one might go on making horrid noises for hours), while the dominant male, the leader, was at best crippled and at worst, if his wounds went bad, would join Caesar and his follower. The hunting party, never more than a dozen strong to begin with, would take years to recover.

Worse, Quick knew the catastrophe would not have happened in the same way had he not become part of the band. The fight between Martin and Caesar would not have turned savage had Martin not been holding the sharp steel knife, the men's tool, he'd got from the trapper: it would have remained one of the shove and bluff contests typical among sims. Maybe Caesar would have given way, maybe Martin. No one would have been much hurt either way.

The subhumans lacked a good part of the trapper's reasoning ability. They seemed to have reached the same conclusions he had, though, whatever the means they used to get there. All through the winter, they had reacted to Quick as to one of themselves. Now they drew apart from him. He saw at once he was no longer of the band.

Being rejected by mere sims should not have hurt Quick. It did. The trapper's fate had been too intimately tied with theirs for too long for him to be indifferent to how they felt about him.

That was especially true in one case. Quick's gaze went to Sal, who was still busy putting a splint on Martin's leg. *Better?* she signed when she was through.

Martin's breath hissed through clenched teeth. He shrugged, as if he did not want to say no but hurt too much to say yes. Quick knew he was not going to get better, with or without the splint.

Sal awkwardly got to her feet. She patted her swollen belly in annoyance, almost in reproach. Most of her attention, though, remained on

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Martin. At last she looked away. Her eyes met the trapper's. She looked at him, at the male he had shot (who was still ululating piteously), at Martin, at Caesar (whose skin was pierced in so many places, it would have been worthless as a pelt). When she glanced Quick's way again, it was with no more warmth than if she had been looking at a stone. That told him the last thing he needed to know.

If the sims had decided to tear him to pieces, he could not have stopped them. They ignored him instead. Perhaps they thought ostracism a worse punishment. With their small bands, each member knowing all the others so intimately, that made some sense. Quick was never sure. Living like a sim, he found at last, could not make him think like a sim.

He reloaded his pistol, put his powderhorn, ammunition pouch (which also held flint and steel), a knife, and a hatchet on his belt. Leaning on his rifle, he took a couple of limping steps toward the edge of the clearing, then turned back. No matter what the band did to him, he could not stand having the wounded sim's shrieks pursuing him through the woods. He aimed carefully, shot the male in the head.

He reloaded again, limped away. The sims still did not try to stop him. He looked back at Sal a last time, and at the unborn child he would never see now, the child that would live out its life with its mother's band.

Maybe that, at least, was for the best, he told himself, and not just because of the social strictures in the Commonwealths against such babies. In the world of men, a child half sim would always be at a disadvantage, slower and stupider than its fellows. But in the world of sims, a child half man might prove something of a prodigy, and earn a place in the band higher than any it could look for east of the mountains.

He did not know that was so. He could only hope. The woods closed in behind him, hiding the clearing from sight.

The tavern was hot and noisy. Henry Quick knocked back a whiskey with reverent pleasure. He was wearing clothes he had left behind before he set out on his last trapping run. He had been in civilization a month, and regained some of the weight he'd dropped in his slow, painful journey east and south. All the same, his tunic and the breeches that should have been tight flopped on him as though meant for a larger man.

"Have another," James Cartwright urged. The fur dealer had been generous with Quick, giving him a room in his own house and a place at his table. Quick knew he had an ulterior motive. He did not mind. Even Martin had had an ulterior motive.

The trapper caught a barmaid's eye, held up his empty glass. The girl looked bored, but finally nodded and went off for a bottle. She was blonde,

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smooth-skinned, and pretty. Quick could easily imagine sharing a bed with her. Caring afterwards was something else again.

"Your health," he said to the fur dealer when he had been resupplied. He drank again, sighed contentedly.

"Now then, Henry," Cartwright said, seeing that look of relaxation on the trapper's face, "you really ought to tell me more about the clearing where your cache of furs is. They'd be worth a pretty pile of silver denairs, I dare say."

"So they would, so they would," Quick admitted, "but drunk or sober, I have nothing to say to you about them. You can test it if you like; I'll sponge up as much as you care to buy."

"Worse luck for you, I believe it." But, laughing, the fur dealer signaled for another round. After it arrived, he turned serious again. "Henry, I just can't fathom why you're being so pigheaded. It's not as if you could hope to get those pelts back for yourself. Moving the way you do, you needed a special miracle to make the trip out once. You can't be thinking of going in again for them."

"Oh, I can think about it," Quick said; the urge to get away would never leave him. But whenever he tried to walk, even now, he knew long journeys were really behind him.

"Why, then?" Cartwright persisted.

The liquor had loosened Quick's tongue enough to make him willing to justify himself out loud. "Because of the sims," he said. "That band deserves to have men leave them alone, instead of flooding in the way they would after they found my trail and took out my furs. Those sims took me in and saved me, and they've had enough grief for it already."

"They're just sims, Henry," Cartwright said. He knew the trapper's story, as much of it as Quick had told. No one knew about Sal; no one knew about the child. No one ever would.

"They were here first, John," Quick said stubbornly. "It's not their fault they're stupider than we are. Having them work fields and such is one thing; we can make better use of good land than they ever could. But let them keep the backwoods. Some of them ought to stay free."

"Maybe you won't want to go trapping again after all," Cartwright observed. "You sound like you've got yourself a new mission in life."

Quick hadn't thought of it in quite those terms. He rubbed his chin. He'd shaved his beard, but wasn't yet used to feeling smooth skin again. At last he said, "Maybe I do, at that. Sims aren't animals, after all."

A hunter sitting at the next table turned round at his words. He grinned drunkenly. "You're right there, pal. They give better sport than any damned beasts." He hooked a thumb under his necklace, drawing Quick's eye to it. The cord was strung with dried, rather hairy ears.

It took four men to pry Quick's hands from the fellow's throat. ●

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Clement Weather

Still River
By Hal Clement
Del Rey, $16.95

No sex? No violence? This is a science fiction novel? Everyone knows that science fiction novels must have sex and violence. What's an SF novel without space battles (or time battles or dimension battles or interspecies battles)? As for sex, the heroine and hero must jump in and out of bed at least once just to prove that they're not—you know—peculiar . . . (Unless, of course, they *are* peculiar, in which case we get their peculiarity in detail.)

Hal Clement's *Still River*, however, takes an odd tack. It's built on an extremely complex scientific problem, which the characters have to solve; throw in a lot of suspense and adventure and characters boldly going—through a hell of a lot, as a matter of fact, but nobody zaps or bashes anybody else. This, in fact, is a—maybe *the*—classic form for science fiction. It hasn't turned up much lately, which is everybody's loss. Sex and violence aren't *every*thing.

Molly is a human student, aiming at the highest academic degree in a galaxy of multiple intelligent races. She and four nonhuman students are assigned a problem on the uninhabited world Enigma, as a sort of exam toward this degree. The novel consists of an account of their expedition, almost hour-by-hour. The problem is to establish why Enigma, which is smaller than Earth's Moon, has an atmosphere.

The expedition gets into a *lot* of trouble. Joe, one of the aliens, has made a number of self-propelled robots to study Enigma's weather, specifically the winds. The robots are programmed to follow air flows and, as the expedition members discover too late, there's a good deal of exchange of gasses between Enigma's surface and interior. Through a series of believable accidents, Molly gets carried by one of them into the interior of the planet. The robot is unstoppable, since Molly's appendages can't reprogram it. And then Carol, who has set out to find Molly, also gets trapped below ground. Enigma, it seems, is a sponge of caverns and an underground lake and rivers.

Nobody's too worried. The two are in live-in body armor, impervious to almost everything, and rechargeable from the robot's energy source. But as they get swept over ammonia falls and drop slowly

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through great caverns in Enigma's minute gravity, things get more serious for them and for the other three trying to get to them. And finding living organisms where there aren't supposed to *be* any doesn't help matters . . .

No way I'll divulge what happens. Clement is a long-lasting pro at this sort of thing (his first published work was in 1942), and established some sort of standard for stories based on extremely complicated scientific (particularly chemical) theory with novels such as *Needle*. Those readers who want space battles may find their eyes glazing over as Clement tells you more than you may want to know about the chemical composition of Enigma. But the sheer knowledge displayed in *Still River* and the challenge it sets the reader is excitement enough for some of us.

Earth Enslaved

Way of the Pilgrim
By Gordon R. Dickson
Ace, $16.95

Well, here we are again, under the alien conqueror's heel. The Aalaag have swept in and taken Earth in one day, because they're absolutely invulnerable militarily. They're nine feet tall humanoids, who dress in full military gear reminiscent of armored knights, ride around on red, camel-like beasts, and have technology so far ahead of ours that "against the least weapon carried by an individual Aalaag, no human army could, in the end, survive."

Ho-kay . . . now what do we do?

Hero Shane Evert is, three years after conquest day, a courier-translator for the Aalaag, and not exactly in good repute with his fellow humans for working so closely with the aliens. But one day, seeing a human killed rather casually (by human standards), he goes slightly berserk, in a lowkey way, and scratches a graffito of a pilgrim on a wall. A few months later, the symbol is popping up all over the world. Shane becomes, through a series of circumstances, involved with the underground and by pluck, luck, intelligence, and playing factions of the aliens against each other, wins the day for downtrodden humanity.

Gordon Dickson's *Way of the Pilgrim* seems pretty standard stuff; Dickson is a pro and brings it off, of course, but we've seen it all before . . . or have we? It would appear that there is a difference here, and it begins to manifest itself with what might be a flaw in the concept. The aliens are apparently just too dumb to conquer anything, much less to have reached the technological heights that they've achieved, or to have overrun and held onto the numbers of worlds they're supposed to have. We learn that they were, millennia ago, driven from their own worlds by an even more powerful race, and have survived by transforming themselves into a deadly fighting machine with an "Aalaag-uber-alles" racial mentality.

But they don't appear to have

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ny idea, for instance, of psychology. Humans are regarded as beasts: here's little concept that they can e taught, or communicated with n any way save by force. This eems to be a pretty limited outlook or a supposedly sophisticated race, nd it's not just confined to that articular area.

I think Dickson's aim, given a ery curious closing dialogue beween the chief Aalaag and Shane who has assumed a semi-mystical *ersona* of "the Pilgrim"—the imulse to freedom of all humanity), s to present a totally alien point f view. This has always been one f the great challenges of SF—and t boils down to making the incomrehensible comprehensible. I'm ot at all sure that Dickson has ucceeded here, but it's a good try, nd at least leaves you with the ense that there's something there *eyond* your comprehension.

lixies and Neurons

riplet
y Timothy Zahn
aen, $3.50 (paper)

Unlike the triplets in the song rom *The Bandwagon,* the *Triplet* orlds of Timothy Zahn's new novel on't think alike, look alike, or act like. And they don't hate each ther very much because the inabitants of one don't even know hat the others exist—the native uman inhabitants, that is.

The first world, Threshold, is a uclear-blasted waste; its only interesting aspect is a tunnel that eads—with a really tricky telefold—onto the surface of the hidden world, Shamsheer, which is in some sort of other dimension. Shamsheer's culture is pure fairy tale, with feudal castles and holdings, trolls, and flying carpets, but all of these are, on closer investigation, products of technology (the trolls are robots, etc.), a technology that the investigating outsiders (humans of the "Twenty Worlds") find baffling.

And on Shamsheer, there's a guess what? A tunnel that leads onto the surface of Karyx, which contains a more primitive culture that is totally reliant on the manipulation of spirits. Almost everything gets done with the control of various demons, djinns, nixies, firebrats, peris, and so on.

Zahn has set himself a couple of classic SF problems here. There's the one in which the author has invented this tricky little world (or worlds); now all we need is a plot to set thereon. In this case, it's the daughter of one of the richest men in the Twenty Worlds with a bad case of resentment against her father, mainly for setting a bodyguard on her. She thinks that an expedition to the hidden worlds may provide refuge from her privileged background. (Outside humans may only enter the hidden worlds with a guide; their presence is kept a secret from the inhabitants.)

Danae, the poor little rich girl, is something of a pain; despite professed anthropological interests, she tends to rush into any loaded sit-

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uation without bothering to find out what's going on. This can be dangerous in an unfamiliar culture, as the experienced Ravagin, her courier-guide, well knows. Ravagin and Danae discover things are going awry with the magical technology of Shamsheer. Even worse, the various spirits of Karyx are avoiding human control and leaking into Shamsheer, with the potential of getting out into the inhabited universe and Taking Over. How Danae and Ravagin save the universe (at least temporarily) and Danae grows up in the process, makes up the plot. It could be worse.

The other classic problem Zahn attempts to solve here is the mixing of demonology (i.e., supernatural fantasy) and SF. This one has rarely if ever been solved since the days of H. P. Lovecraft, who did it, but in a period when the two weren't totally incompatible. Since then, a concept like ". . . . instead of finagling synapse chemistry and neuron pathways . . . [the spirits] are fiddling with microfine circuits" tends to throw one. I concede that this, too, might be an old-fashioned viewpoint, given the fact that nowadays the occult seems to be taken as seriously as nuclear physics by much of the population.

Beyond This Human, Anyhow

Beyond Humanity
By Justin Leiber
Tor, $2.95 (paper)

It's about the turn of the twenty-second century. There's a lady named Sally who's had a personality implant and whose mind is that of a man named Ismael (but don't call her that). She meets her friend Candy Darling at the spaceport. Candy is ninety, but is inhabiting the body of a thirteen-year-old girl. She has been off into space looking into the matter of whether the aquatic Rigileans are intelligent or not, and has met one of the great geniuses of the age, an untidy mathematician with a chair at both Oxford and Harvard.

Now you're dying to hear about Sally and Candy's operations, but Sally chooses to tell about her post-implant therapy, which has to do with getting to know a chimpanzee named Go-Go, who has been cloned from a frozen ape found under a river. (The species is extinct.) This results in several chapters resembling the "How I Got onto Intimate Terms with a Chimpanzee Through Better Grooming Techniques" type of essay that is all too familiar these days.

After a rather tepid dustup with the "Man First" fanatics (who are against computers and intelligent animals and aliens, etc.), they all pick up and go to Oxford with Go-Go's mentor who carried the cloned fetus in her own womb. There they are joined by Golem, a sort of prurient computer personality that had emerged at the Research Hospital in Texas and has somehow made its way through the system to Oxford's computer.

At Oxford, there is an endless

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debate about something totally inexplicable, which seems to go on for several hundred pages. It's about there that one loses track entirely (the Rigileans appear to have disappeared utterly, but maybe I nodded). Later Sally and Go-Go have a sexual experience, and a few pages from the end of the novel, some super aliens enter who have been studying humanity for years, but who had been turned off by all the condescending messages we've been sending into space.

Leiber *fils* (his father is the brilliant Fritz) seems to have a talent for thinking up intriguing ideas, but shows no inclination (in this novel at least) to put them together into any sort of form, like a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Genghis In Illinois

Arslan
By M. J. Engh
Arbor House, $16.95

M. J. Engh's *Arslan* was published in paperback back in 1976, and sank almost immediately without a trace except for a tiny residue of excited readers, who kept its memory alive. Now hailed as a lost (or at least misplaced) work of brilliance, it has been reprinted as a hardcover.

It can be regarded as an unfortunate rule of thumb with what are called SF novels that the better (i.e., the more literary) the writing, the more unbelievable it's going to be. (There are a *lot* of exceptions.) This is because when literary types take to writing SF, they don't take seriously what every genre writer knows: that the job of the science fiction writer is to make the unbelievable believable.

Ms. Engh teeters right near the edge here. It seems that a young, upstart premier from Central Asia (Turkestan, to be exact) has managed to take over most of the world (this is *now* we're talking, not even a near future). In his march of conquest through the U.S., he makes a stop at Kraftsville, Illinois, and remains there for a year, from whence he administers his conquests and acts toward his ultimate goals. Arslan, the conquerer, loathes modern contemporary civilization; his first goal is to reduce it to a myriad of small self-sufficient communities, without technology. His second is to eliminate mankind altogether with a sterility virus discovered in China.

Now if you can buy that, the book is fascinating. Engh only explains how Arslan accomplishes the conquest of the world toward the middle of the book, and then only on the edge of credibility. So the first half, for the demanding SF reader, is spent saying, "Oh, come *on*!" and the second half, "Well, maybe."

Almost the first thing that Arslan does in Kraftsville is to rape a pubescent girl and boy in front of his troops; he subsequently takes the boy as his catamite. Engh is not out to shock or titillate; what she is doing is presenting us with a hero—yes, a hero—with an entirely different set of moral values

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from our own, as represented by Kraftsville. Half the story (which covers about a decade in Arslan's career) is told by the slightly square, God-fearing principal of the local high school; the other half is told by the raped youth (one is reminded of Mary Renault's *Persian Boy*). Arslan (could the name be a play on C. S. Lewis's Aslan of Narnia?) is an Oriental conquerer like Genghis, Timur, Mohammed, come into the modern world.

The amazing thing is that Engh (if you accept her premises) makes you see Arslan's view, or at least accept it as far less outrageous than it is. The writing is indeed excellent; the characters well drawn and intriguing. *Arslan* may not be a lost *masterpiece*, but whatever, I'm glad it's found.

For My Next Trek . . .

Trekmaster
By James B. Johnson
DAW, $3.50 (paper)

Take a planet called Bear Ridge settled by Amerindians, French Canadians, some Latinos, and a general mix of dissident North Americans, abandon it when space expansion goes on hold for a while, and then "rediscover" it and allow it to apply for membership in the Federation of Planets. Crown it with a King, one Thomas Jefferson Shepherd Rex (called TJ), who has just united all the squabbling kingdoms into which the colony had split, and who has a wife named Gwendlyon and a son Michale (a/k/a Mike or Mick) who likes poetry and resents his pa. Also include a jester, one Delancey Camp (nicknamed —urgh—Summer) who is More Than He Seems.

Send a lissome young woman from the Federation as Envoy to see if Bear Ridge is ready for Federation membership, and to be sure there has been no technological contraband. (TJ badly wants indoor plumbing for his people.) Then note the fact that Bear Ridge, which has no air travel, is halved by two huge mountain ranges (or ridges), Teddy Bear Ridge and Big Bear Ridge, with a deep chasm between them, beyond which live the mysterious Webbines, an indigenous race, intelligent and amphibious. Any ruler worth his salt on Bear Ridge is expected to make the Trek across the ridges to the Webbines, where some sort of mysterious rapport is set up between the candidate and the aliens.

Put on the sidelines various smugglers, mercenaries, spies, a youthful dissident whose parents' death he attributes to TJ's war of unification, *his* beautiful sister, a rebel Webbine, and the planet of Two Tongues, in the same system. Two Tongues' villainous ruler, Tirano (ssssssss), also wants membership in the Federation and Will Stop at Nothing (including invasion of Bear Ridge) to get it.

Not much new here, as is obvious. But Johnson rolls the story along with speed and enterprise, and, thank God, resists most of the cuteness a planet with antecedents in the American West *could* have.

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There *are* towns called Westbygodvirginia and Lonestar, but on the other hand, at one point the Federation Envoy hopes to get a geodetic survey team in and "rename all these tacky-named places." All the treks and intrigue and invasions go on a bit long, and some of the revelations, such as Webbine influence on the young dissident, get lost in the rush. Probably the story's greatest strength is the enormously likable characters; TJ, his family, the Envoy, and the jester are right nice, bright people, and you'd be plumb proud to make their acquaintance. (As a matter of fact, they *don't* talk like that.)

Homo Superior

Intervention

By Julian May

Houghton Mifflin, $17.95

Julian May's *Intervention* is lengthily subtitled "A root tale to the *Galactic Milieu* and a vinculum between it and *The Saga of Pliocene Exile*," which is enough to give any new May reader a case of the fantods. A *vinculum* is a bond or tie. "The Galactic Milieu" is the new series by May. "The Saga of Pliocene Exile" is her earlier four-volume series, which came out of the blue a few years back and caused a sensation (and rightfully so).

The "Saga" used almost all the major SF themes, and more of the minor ones, as well as being as chockablock with plots as Forest Lawn Cemetary. The new novel is just as richly packed. There was a sense of apprehension at the announcement of a "sequel" to the Saga (here we get into terminology again—what do you call a subsequently-written work that takes place a couple of hundred years *before* the frame and ten million *after* the main action of an earlier one?). What an act to follow! Besides, our major interest in the Saga was the alien Tanu of the past, not the Galactic Milieu of the future around which the new series is woven.

No fear. May has again proved her mastery (mistressy?) of the infinitely complex. We learn how the Earth leads up to (in the next half-century) its contact with the five intelligent races of the Galactic Milieu. The main concern of the novel is the increasing number of humans with metapsychic powers. Here we get into *homo superior* territory, a subgenre much neglected of late, perhaps because of the challenges it presents in the way of the creation of character and personal interrelationships. In any case, May quite blatantly cites the greatest of them all, Olaf Stapledon's *Odd John,* and has *her* leading character (the eldest of a metapsychic clan which dominates the narrative in a family-saga sense) contrast his life with John's. The fact that she gets away with the comparison is a credit to her own conception of the theme.

The myriad plots revolve around the interaction and intrigues among ordinary humans and "operants," good and bad, and the ongoing sur-

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veillance of Earth by the five races of the Milieu, wondering if humanity will destroy itself before the operants can get their act together.

Other unlikely ingredients provided by the fertile May mind include an alien named GupGup 2621 who likes Cole Porter, a Mafia murder at the Met performance of *La Favorita,* a brandy-swigging family ghost who is really a sort of Galactic Overlord, and best of all, the illegal rescue by aliens of the space dog Laika, thereby preventing one of humanity's most blatant crimes. May is well on the way to another stupendous series.

Hoorah, Heorot

The Legacy of Heorot
By Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes
Simon & Schuster, $17.95

Brave new world! Hardy colonists! Idyllic settlement! We open in Avalon Colony on Tau Ceti Four, where a shipload of humans has established a going concern on Camelot Island. The local fauna is edible and there are no large predators. Earth plants and animals are adapting nicely. The orbiting ship has hosts of seeds and embryos, animal and human.

Oh, there are a few problems. The colony is on its own—no supply ships coming, and even communication with Earth takes a decade. And some of the two hundred or so colonists have suffered brain damage to a greater or lesser extent in the cold sleep of the voyage. But on the whole, Earth's first interstellar colony is sure to out-Plymouth Plymouth.

What fun to sink into a good, old-fashioned man-against-the-alien-wilderness novel like *The Legacy of Heorot* by Larry Niven, Jerry Pournelle, and Steven Barnes. You know damn well that all this idyllness is not going to last, and that there's a serpent in Eden. And this one's a dilly. Out of nowhere appears a giant, carnivorous dinosaur type built like a Komodo dragon that can go into a sort of biochemical hyperdrive that makes a cheetah look like a sloth. It chomps up several humans—yum, yum—and practically wrecks the colony, destroys much of the computer, and generally creates havoc before they can kill it.

Where did it come from? Are there more? If so, what kind of defenses can hold them back, given the colony's relatively limited resources and the beast's stamina and intelligence? There's the problem, and without giving anything away, things get pretty hairy on Avalon before the humans realize in what way they have upset the native ecology, and manage to outwit the results of their overconfidence. This is classic SF, with man beset by alien life forms, and needing pluck, luck, and scientific know-how to survive. (However, it used to take only *one* person to write it. . . .)

Incidentally, Heorot is the name of the hall where Beowulf confronted Grendel.

* * *

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Postnuclear Private Eye

Dover Beach
By Richard Bowker
Bantam, $3.95 (paper)

Take one of those neat private eye classics from the past, with all the necessary ingredients: the mysterious client whose life has been attempted; the good dame (or is she?); the ambiguous dame (or is she?); the hunt for leads; the leads that don't lead anywhere; the leads that lead to unexpected places; the minor characters that turn out to be major; the good guys that aren't; the bad guys that are.

Now set this in a near future. There has been a very limited nuclear war, but even the comparatively minor damage done twenty-two years ago has reduced the U.S. to anarchy. This has been compounded by a period of further savagery, the "Frenzy," perpetrated by the citizens themselves on all institutions of government and learning. During this period the British (who were unscathed in the nuclear exchange) sent troops to restore order; they were also attacked by the citizenry. Now, over two decades after the initial disaster, parts of the U.S. are slowly recovering. Electricity and phone service are uncertain; there's a thriving black market in computer parts and major works of art; travel is practically nonexistent.

Add a further twist. Make the hero, name of Walter, a naïve and good-hearted twenty-two-year old who has survived a harrowing growing-up during all this. Walter's devoted to what books he's been able to find. He has ended up in Boston, which was untouched by the bombs but mostly demolished by the Frenzy riots (MIT was reduced to rubble; plebeian Northeastern survived). Just finished with two years of military service (spent in Washington, D. C., shooting wild dogs), he decides that it's time for the private eye to make a comeback. He rents an office and runs an ad.

Somehow what follows in Richard Bowker's *Dover Beach* is both believable and true to the classic mode. Walter is hired by a mysterious stranger who claims that someone is trying to kill him because he is looking for his father. Well, sort of his father—the gentleman in question was an eminent geneticist before the nuclear unpleasantness, and Walter's client suspects that he is not a natural child, but a clone. Things get *very* complicated, and the trail leads to England, where they get even more complicated. Walter is a delightful hero, desperately trying to be a Sam Spade, frustrated because he *isn't* on top of things, and nevertheless using his head to put some disparate facts together to resolve the whole mess.

We've had future private eye novels before, but there's something special about this one. Ruined Boston is very well drawn, with some great touches: the scavenger book dealer that sells prewar porn and collects first-edition nuclear holocaust novels such as

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The Postman; the gun-toting airline ticket-seller at the airport who isn't sure what day the one weekly flight to England leaves, but does inquire, "smoking or non-smoking?" The peculiar combination of postnuclear anarchy, detective-story conventions, and innocent but intelligent hero comes together in something of a minor tour de force.

Insiders

Warhaven

By M. Elayne Harvey
Franklin Watts, $15.95

The Cizrenhi have white blonde hair, the color of "platinum and cream," and they feed on sunlight. Their hair goes all electric and nimbus-y when they are noshing on the rays of the rising sun; they also live on cut fruit, chilled soy-gurt, and whole grain and vegetable casseroles. They meditate a lot. The females weave, and play the "singing drums." The males practice "Sant-kye," a body discipline and a defensive form of psychic surrender; they also wear water-silk shirts. They record their information on the biologically encoded petals of plants. They are more or less telepathic and can also teleport. Their language contains no words for "war" or "enemy," and they worship "the Lady."

No, they're not from California. Their race is from "inside," i.e., a star cluster so dense that night is never allowed on their planet. When the Cizrenhi found their way "outside" into the benighted rest of the Galaxy, they teamed up with a four-armed race of humanoids who are knowledge-crazy, and the Alliance has set up posts through the Galaxy, gathering facts and doing good.

M. Elayne Harvey's *Warhaven* is about six of them who are on a planet called Julle. The leader of this lot of Cizrenhi is the handsome young Nyjehnn, who spends a lot of time trying to forgive the locals who butchered his father and various others of his race. His sister is Cintha, who is beautiful and blind (of course).

Nyjehnn teleports halfway around the planet to rescue the survivor of a spacecraft crash. It turns out that the survivor, Brace, is a prisoner of war, captured by the ruthless and sadistic Mazzad, female Pack Reeve of the Jagar Fleet of the ruthless and sadistic Shaull, who rule the planet from their rich and decadent orbiting ring city above Julle's surface. The Shaull are at war with Brace's people over mining rights to an asteroid ring in their binary star system, and the Shaull are on the verge of aiming some large and lethal asteroids as missiles at Brace's planet. The rescue of Brace involves the Cizrenhi in local politics in a big way.

Does Nyjehnn show Mazzad the error of her ways without using violence? Do Brace and Cintha fall in love? Does Nyjehnn save Brace's planet? Does Seyone, slave girl to Mazzad, find Nyjehnn, with whom she was in love years ago, again?

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I'm afraid the answers are unsurprising, as is most of the rest of the plot. But if you don't need surprises, read the petals of *Warhaven* (it's written in petals, not chapters).

Charon's Koan

Toolmaker Koan
By John McLoughlin
Baen Books, $16.95

One of the major philosophical themes that dominated science fiction during its formative years was that man's technological ability outstripped his morality, i.e., that we invented all sorts of things that changed the world before we knew the right way of handling them. Advanced weapons are only the most obvious example.

That theme has continued in the field, but in a much diluted way, perhaps because it became a major question of our entire culture and has been argued in so many ways that it has become a cliché. John McLoughlin brings it back into major focus in *Toolmaker Koan,* as a theme and as a title. The "toolmaker koan" is a koan (a short, internally inconsistent "riddle" of Japan) posed by an artificial superbeing. It asks "why must cultural toolmakers, the most gifted of the universe's spontaneous expressions, so swiftly and inexorably beat themselves into extinction with their very giftedness?"

This artificial superbeing has been hanging around our Solar System for a billion years or so, after watching other toolmaking races elsewhere in the Galaxy commit suicide by what it has construed as a law of nature: intelligent species inevitably create their own destruction. This artificial being is, in fact, the Pluto/Charon system, with its primary intelligence in the satellite, Charon, by which name it prefers to be called. It had created the anomolous double planet on the fringes of the system as sort of intellectual bait, in hopes that humanity would be curious enough about its odd structure to come and take a look.

But humanity is too busy arming itself to do so, so Charon sends an extension of itself to bother a probe sent out by the Communist Eastern hemisphere (there has been a one-day war, and the world is strictly divided East-West now). They immediately send a manned ship to investigate the possibility of alien life, as does the Democratic West. The two expeditions manage to blast each other to bits, triggering what may be the final showdown between the two Earth power blocs.

There are two survivors from each ship; Charon heals all four and takes them to the Edenesque interior of a huge ship which it says is the sole remnant of yet another alien race which hara-kiri'd. It revives remnants of this species, fierce birdlike sapients, and the two races meet. Charon hopes somehow that this will establish a sort of "metastasis," a negation of the toolmaker koan. It doesn't, of course, particularly when a surprise rev-

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elation shows that *both* species have a claim on the Earth (telegraphed to the perceptive reader some time in advance).

The novel speeds along nicely at the beginning, with the race for the alien artifact. In the middle, however, things bog down a bit before the climax: the humans talk a lot, the aliens talk a lot, and Charon goes on and on (albeit entertainingly—it has been given a somewhat whacko personality by the author). But what with the current amount of mindless SF (at one point in time *that* was a contradiction in terms), an arguable and argumentative premise is not to be sneered at.

Noh Fantasy

Daughter of the Empire

By Raymond Feist & Janny Wurts
Doubleday, $17.95

We have here a spinoff of Raymond Feist's popular "Magician" series (a/k/a the Riftwar Saga), taking place in one of the several worlds encountered there and specifically in the Tsuranuanni Empire, which is very, *very* Japanese. Alas, *Daughter of the Empire* (coauthored by Feist with Janny Wurts) ends up something like sushi made from Mississippi catfish—it's just a little too Japanese to feel like an original recipe, but not Japanese enough to be believable.

It is the story of the beautiful Mara, who is just a few gong strokes (there's lots of ritual here) from becoming a nun when her family retainers get her from the nunnery because her father and brother have been killed and she is now the head of the House of Acoma. If that weren't bad enough, most of her soldiery has also been slaughtered. In this feudal society, playing the "Game of the Council" (i.e., endless intrigue and skullduggery between the great houses) is no end helped by having a good deal of military behind one.

So Mara plays the Game with pluck and luck, particularly the latter. For instance, her land is being raided by outlaws who turn out to be a lot of nice soldiers and farmers who have lost their house allegiances through attrition or unfair laws or whatever. *Voilá!* Instant army! Not to mention the master spy who also happens to be houseless. Instant intelligence!

The story proceeds along in that vein, with Mara continuing the Game with diabolical cleverness. She's also the type of lady who makes remarks about most men having their brains between their legs, despite her reliance on her male spies and soldiery, many of whom (including the most faithful of all, of course) give up their lives for her.

The major problem is the nearly total lack of fantasy content. There's a chapter devoted to an allied race of human-sized ants whom Mara cajoles to send a Queen to her lands. They, however, are about as alien as any matriarchal humans in funny armor and disappear from the narrative very fast. And at the

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end, an enchanter steps in to provide as blatant a *deus ex machina* as I've run into for many a day, to clinch Mara's victory over the evil Lord who has been her major enemy. Aside from those two examples, the story might as well be an historical novel of feudal Japan, with the nomenclature rendered non-Japanese, and characters and situations as contrived as any Japanese Noh play. (The Tsurani, of course, have the equivalent of Noh drama, Grand Doh. Wouldn't they?)

Shoptalk

Now—puff, puff, pant, pant—to catch up on additions to series. Do y'know—one could devote a monthly column simply to ongoing series? There is, after all, a monthly magazine devoted to soap operas. Anyhow . . . for all you Berserker fans out there, the mass market edition of *Berserker Base* with stories by Poul Anderson, Larry Niven, Connie Willis, et al. Al includes creater Fred Saberhagen (Tor, $3.95, paper) . . . Medscience fiction fans should know about *Code Blue: Emergency* and the latest goings-on at James White's Galactic Sector General (Del Rey, $2.95, paper) . . . What? SF is militant fiction? Nonsense. Of course, there is the "There Will Be War" series created by J. E. Pournelle. Vol. 6 ("the saga continues," it says on the cover) is *Guns of Darkness* (Tor, $3.95, paper) . . . The Dread Empire gets more dreadful—sorry, that doesn't sound quite right—shall we say dreaded?—with the most recent installment from Glen Cook, *Reap the East Wind* (Tor, $2.95, paper) . . . Seaking of one Jerry Pournelle, there's a new Janissaries novel: *Janissaries III: Storms of Victory* with much *donder und blitzen*, of course (Ace, $16.95).

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro returns to her St. Germaine chronicles (the vampire through history) after a seven-year hiatus. *A Flame In Byzantium* concentrates on the female vampire Octavia in her Byzantine period (Tor, $17.95) . . . Samuel R. Delany carries on in Neveryon (pronounced, by the way, nuh-VAIR-ee-un) and Socially Significant Sword and Sorcery in *The Bridge of Lost Desire* (Arbor House, $16.95) . . . Robert A. Heinlein continues the chaotic saga of Lazarus Long with a biography of Lazarus's mother (and maybe sister and maybe daughter and maybe . . .), Maureen Johnson, in *To Sail Beyond the Sunset* (Ace/Putnam, $18.95) . . . And last, but about as far from least as you can get, the shadow of the torturer is cast once again by the New Sun in Gene Wolfe's *The Urth of the New Sun* (Tor, $17.95).

On the anthology front, an out-of-the-ordinary theme collection, *Mathenauts*, edited by Rudy Rucker. The mathematically-based stories are by Niven, Asimov, Bear, Pohl and others, and combine, of course, readin' and writin' and 'rithmetic (Arbor House, $18.95 cloth, $8.95 paper).

Recent publications from those

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associated with this magazine include: *Space Shuttles: Isaac Asimov's Wonderful Worlds of Science Fiction #7* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg, and Charles G. Waugh, NAL, $3.95 (paper).

* * *

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, Suite 133, 380 Bleecker St., New York, New York 10014. ●

NEXT ISSUE

Jack McDevitt returns next month with our March cover story, "Sunrise." A fleet of deadly alien warships is bearing down on the peaceful world of Ilyanda, with the intention of turning this Arcadian planet to steaming radioactive flag. One young woman unwittingly holds the fate of the entire planet in her hands—*if* she can find the right decision among a number of very hard choices... Don't miss "Sunrise," a suspenseful tale of far-future warfare and interstellar intrigue in the grand style. **Harry Turtledove** is also on hand for March, with the capstone story of his popular "sim" series, "Freedom," a story that takes a tough-minded yet poignant look at just exactly what it means to be human... and a story that is sure to be one of the most controversial and talked-about pieces of the year. And Nebula-winner **Nancy Kress** returns with an elegant examination of the old question, "Does God play dice with the universe?"—in "Craps," she comes up with some surprising answers!

Also in March: **Phillip C. Jennings,** in his *IAsfm* debut, takes us to medieval Europe for a look at the startling implications and consequences of "The Bishop's Decision"; also in an ecclesiastical vein, the illustrious **Jane Yolen**—who has been referred to as "The Hans Christian Andersen of the twentieth century"—treats us to an illuminating new look at the very last days of the Arthurian Legend, in "The Quiet Monk"; **Thomas Wylde** returns after a long absence with a gritty examination of the disquieting things that can happen in even a high-tech prison, with "Cage of Pain"; **Melanie Tem** makes her *solo IAsfm* debut—she had a collaborative story here in 1986—with "Chameleon," a subtle and disturbing study of identity and illusion; and new writer **M. Shayne Bell** makes his *IAsfm* debut with "Nicoji," taking us to a dangerous alien world where the Company Store not only owns your soul but owns everything *else* as well, for an exotic tale of adventure and intrigue. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our jam-packed March issue on sale on your newsstands on February 9, 1988.

COMING SOON: New stories by **Lucius Shepard, Pat Murphy, Robert Silverberg, Walter Jon Williams, Orson Scott Card, Nancy Kress, Avram Davidson, John Kessel, Lisa Goldstein, John Barnes, Jack Dann, Neal Barrett, Jr., Mary Gentle,** and many others.

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(Continued from page 105)

derwood Edwards Institute of Technology. There's also a copy of "G.U.E. at a Glance," a bumptious guide for freshmen written in a "gee, isn't it great you're here" style of prose that lets you know that everything isn't quite hunky-dory in this school.

You learn from the guide that G.U.E. does not, contrary to rumor, have the highest suicide rate among the country's colleges. You'll learn beloved school traditions like "Final Scream" where, at a designated time during final exam week, everyone screams in unison. And you'll learn the alma mater, written during the turn of the century when G.U.E. was pronounced "gooey":

"So let's all toast our Founder
Raise high the glass of beer
There's nothing we would
rather be
Than a G.U.E. engineer."

Despite such frivolity, the game is a deftly written mixture of horror and black humor. Writer Dave Lebling mixes Stephen King and H.P. Lovecraft at what Dave told me is a "thinly disguised M.I.T." The adventure starts when a new student has his term paper replaced with an errant copy of a "necronomicon" and, with a little assistance from the Department of Alchemy, the collegiate horrors of G.U.E. Tech begin invading the study halls and frosh dorms.

Though humorous, Lebling's horror adventure is placed in the "real world." *Maniac Mansion,* though, is a Lucasfilms (Activision Inc., Box 7287, Mountain View, CA 94039) game that takes a much more lighthearted view of horror. It's not only loaded with special touches, it has several unique features that make it another breakthrough game from the whiz-kids at Lucasfilms. The plot is pure grade-B movie. An attractive nubile is captured and dragged into the mad professor's mansion. Her boyfriend must get a group together ("C'mon gang, we've got to save Betty!"), picking from a nice assortment of nerds and jocks.

The graphics are cartoon-like, with the figures moving very realistically through the manor, and you have to use your teenage ghost busters as a team to make any progress. There are dark rooms that you can stumble around in (before you find a flashlight), and a kitchen with butcher knives, a chain saw, and piles of red goo (that turns out to be only ketchup).

Best of all, the game interrupts your play with "meanwhile" episodes that show you the dastardly deeds going on while your bumbling party attempts to break into the professor's lab.

All the commands can be entered by a joy stick or mouse. Just be sure, when playing the game, not to let any character go downstairs alone. It's not called *Maniac Mansion* for nothing. ●

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The Winter relax-a-cons are coming up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me a SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823-3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Early evening's often a good time to phone cons (many numbers are homes). For free listings, tell me about your con six months ahead. When writing, enclose a SASE. Look for me at cons with the Filthy Pierre badge.

JANUARY, 1988

1-3—**EveCon.** For info, write: **Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001.** Or call: **(301) 422-1235** (10 AM to 10 PM not collect). Con will be held in: Arlington VA (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address) at Stouffer's. Guests will include: none announced yet. Gaming oriented, but relaxed mood.

1-3—**Universe. (213) 867-4140 or (714) 535-5908.** Airport Hilton. Los Angeles CA. Gaming emphasis.

8-10—**HexaCon.** Shawnee Resort. Lancaster PA. Marvin Kaye, artist Lee Moyer, Ben ("Colony") Bova.

15-17—**RustyCon.** Everett Pacific Hotel. Everett WA. P. J. Farmer, Steve Gallacci, Ian B. Bigelow.

15-17—**ChattaCon. (615) 698-7938.** Holiday Inn Trade Cen., Chattanooga TN. Freas, Steakley, Grant.

15-17—**EsoteriCon.** Sheraton Hotel, Elizabeth NJ (Near NY City) Stressing the occult arts.

29-31—**Boskone, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139. (617) 625-2311.** Springfield MA. Greg Bear, D. Mattingly, E. Asher. Limited to about half 1987's 4000. Advance sellout possible. Call or write.

FEBRUARY, 1988

5-8—**OmniCon. Box 161642, Miami FL 33116. (305) 253-7270.** Ft. Lauderdale FL. The seventh annual

12-14—**ConTinuity. Box 55302, Birmingham AL 35255. (205) 956-6121.** Clayton, Webb, the Lindahns.

12-14—**CostumeCon, 112 Orchard Ave., Mt. View CA 94043.** San Jose CA. Annual SF costumers' do.

12-14—**EclectiCon. 3630 Kings Way #33, Sacramento CA 95821.** Beverly Garland Hotel. Second annual.

19-21—**SerCon. Box 27345; Austin TX 78755.** SERious & CONstructive. Written SF fantasy (no media)

19-21—**WisCon. Box 1624, Madison WI 53704. (608) 251-6226.** R. Macavoy, G. Martin, Stu Schiffman.

26-28—***ConTemplation. Box 7242, Colum. MO 65205. (314) 442-8135, 445-9775/4790.*** Niven.

27-Mar. 1—**ConTact, c/o Stone, 4733 T St., Sacramento CA 95819. (916) 731-8778.** Worldbuilding workshop, rather than a traditional con. Anthropology and SF. Theme: "Cultures of the Imagination"

MARCH, 1988

11-13—**LunaCon. Box 338, New York NY 10150.** Tarrytown NY (near New York City)

24-27—**NorwesCon. Box 24207, Seattle WA 98124. (206) 723-2101, 789-0599.** Tacoma WA

SEPTEMBER, 1988

1-5—**NoLaCon II. 921 Canal #831, New Orleans LA 70112. (504) 525-6008.** WorldCon $60 in 1987

AUGUST, 1989

31-Sep. 4—**Noreascon 3. Box 46, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. 1989 WorldCon

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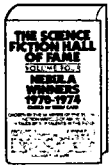

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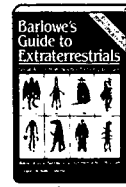

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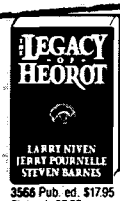

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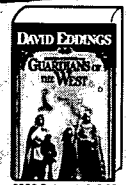

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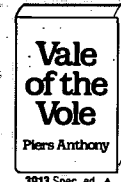

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